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OR,

JACK JARVIS' HOLD-UP

A STORY OF THE

Tenderfoot in the Wild West.

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AUTHOR OF "NEW YORK NAT" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OVERLAND DRIVER'S BOY PARD.

THE coach on the Overland Branch to the mining-camp of Mountain City was rolling along at a fair pace, over the perilous trail it had to travel, the eagle eyes of the driver searching every rock and dark covert ahead,

THEN BEGAN THE DEADLY AND LIVELY MUSIC OF BUFFALO BILL'S MATCHLESS GUN.

for well he knew that there might be concealed the deadliest of foes, the outlaw band known as the Mounted Miners, from the fact that they mined what other people had worked honestly and hard to obtain, with a rifle and revolver instead of shovel and pick.

Upon the box were two persons, the driver, Joe Jarvis, a handsome fellow and one of the best hands that ever held the ribbons over a six-in-hand, and a boy, for such his companion was in years, being only about seventeen years of age.

The youth was dressed in corduroy, top boots, slouch hat, had a belt of arms about his waist, and a new cavalry carbine, a breechloader, lay upon the coach by his side.

His face was a striking one, darkly bronzed by long exposure, frank, fearless and determined, a face that a man of thirty could have possessed, so strongly was it stamped with character.

Upon the top of the coach, swaying to and fro to the movements of the vehicle, sat a huge dog, gaunt, savage looking, and as strong as a panther.

He seemed to be taking in the scenery as the coach went along, but his intensely bright eyes peered ahead as well, as though on the search for a foe.

"Waal, boy pard, we'll soon be whar' I first met yer, when yer was held up by ther outlaws, as yer was trampin' on ter Mountain City, and yer dog thar' helped yer out o' a ugly scrape," said Joe Jarvis, breaking the silence that both had maintained for a mile or more.

"Yes, as Chum often helps me out of scrapes, Mr. Jarvis."

"There yer be ag'in, Misterin' me. I'm plain Joe Jarvis, and ef yer don't call me Joe, blamed ef I don't cut ye'r acquaintance."

"With such a threat staring me in the face, Joe goes every time," laughed the youth.

"Yes, Joe goes, and he knows that he owes his life to you, a boy tramp, as yer calls ye'rself, for when ye'r dog lit in on ther outlaws you got a chance ter play ye'r keerds, and 'atween yer, ther three Mounted Miners was downed when I drew up, and they was layin' fer me, not fer you, only you happened along fu'st."

"Then look at yer."

"Well, Joe?"

"Yer struck out on ther trail I p'inted out ter yer ter Fort Vidette, saved Buffalo Bill from being ambushed, and made him your pard fer life."

"He quickly canceled the debt, Joe, for he saved me the next day from the redskins, and, several days after, when I was almost to Mountain City, and the miners would have hanged me because I had the horse of their comrade, did he not come just in time, and you also, and take me with you on this run?"

"Oh, no, if I saved you and Buffalo Bill, you have both more than settled the debt, Joe."

"Not in a thousand years."

"I was glad to have you go on this run with me, and I'll be tickled to interdooce yer in society in Mountain City, and let ther galoots who would hev' hanged yer see that they had treed ther wrong coon."

"I has ye'r two horses I carried on thar' for yer, and which is your property, as they was ther outlaws' animals, and out here that kind o' law goes."

"They will sell fer a little money, and ef yer needs more, call on me, for I has got it ter throw ter ther birds, and I knows, as you and ye'r dog were trampin' when I met yer on my last run, yer hain't got too much o' ther yaller metal."

"Thanks! But I sold the outlaws' other horses and outfits at the fort, as Buffalo Bill told me to do, so I am quite rich for

a boy tramp—be quiet, Chum," and the youth addressed his dog, who was showing signs of uneasiness.

"Now, what are ther matter with thet grizzly wolf o' yourn, fer he's as oneasy as a young feller courtin' his gal when her daddy be around."

"Draw up, Joe, quick, and let Chum get down, for he's got the scent of something."

Joe Jarvis pressed his foot hard down upon the brake, drew in his horses, and the coach came to a standstill.

Then Ned Osmond said:

"Now, Chum, what is it, old dog?"

The dog quickly got down upon the dash and leaped from there to the ground.

Then he ran rapidly on ahead and disappeared up the trail.

"All right, Joe. As long as Chum's on ahead as patrol we have nothing to fear, so now tell me what you said you wished to."

"I'll do it, young pard, and it is a confession I have to make, a secret I have to tell you," and the face of the Overland driver became at once most serious, while a look of intense sadness dwelt afar back in his fine eyes.

CHAPTER II.

DRIVER JOE'S CONFESSION.

"Yas, boy pard, I told yer I had something ter tell yer, and its a secret I wishes ter remain in its grave, save thet you shall know it, but I wants ter talk ter some one about it, and thar' is no tellin' when I'll see Buffalo Bill ag'in, and I trusts you same as yer was a man."

"But I'll drop my voice, fer I hain't makin' a speech fer ther public," and Joe Jarvis gave a jerk of his hand to indicate that he did not wish the people in the coach to hear him.

"What you tell me, Joe, I shall keep as a dead secret, of course," replied the youth, and after a moment the driver said:

"It was ye'r dog who did it, fer he jumped onter him and gripped his throat in them powerful jaws o' his."

"I hain't no hard feelin's ag'in' ye'r dog, 'cause, poor dumb critter, he was protectin' yer, his master, from three outlaws wearin' masks."

"He didn't know who they was, save thet, when he come along ter overtake yer they had yer held up, and was about ter down yer, so he chipped in, you played yer keerds, and ther game was won."

"But ther feller as ther dog got his grip on?"

"Yer see me thet day when I tuk his mask off, and I seen thet you know'd I hed recognized him."

"I lied ter yer when I said I didn't, fer I did know him."

"Away back some fifteen years ago thar' was a mighty pretty home on a farm on the Missouri River, and a happy family dwelt thar'."

"But thar' come inter ther' home a imp in ther guise o' an angel, ther young school marm who teached ther country children."

"I lived in thet home with my father and mother, and my brother, and ther school marm were a distant cousin o' ours."

"I fell in love with her, so did my twin brother, and she perfended she were in love with us both, and made each believe she was going to become his wife, but told us ter keep it secret."

"Waal, it were a secret as wouldn't keep along whar' ther lovers was twin brothers, and I told my mother."

"My brother hed done ther same, and that evening a gent came to ther farm as was going ter marry ther girl right off and take her away with him, as he had been engaged to her for a year, and jist got a fortin' left him."

"Waal, it hit me a hard blow, boy pard, fer I would hev' trusted ther woman as I

did my mother; but it made my bro' crazy mad, and that night he shot ther man through ther winder as he sat talkin' to ther girl in ther parlor."

"He kilt him, and had ter run fer his life."

"Ther girl were ill fer a long time, and, fool like, I fergived her, and she promised ter marry me after a year of mournin'."

"Well, I waited, and meanwhile my father died, and it was found he hed no property of his own, all bein' mortgaged to pay notes he had indorsed for friends."

"Then ther gal begun ter git sweet on a rich young farmer I hed never liked, and he told me plainly his money would win her from me."

"One evening I came across them in ther woods, and he told me they was engaged; she laughed at me, and—well, I did almost as bad as my poor brother did, only I didn't kill him from ambush, but forced him to fight me then and there, for both of us had our rifles."

"Do you believe it, boy pard, thet girl stepped off the distance and gave the word to fire."

"His bullet cut through my arm, and my bullet went into his heart."

"Then she said to me, in a voice as cool as ice:

"Ef yer don't want ter hang, Joe Jarvis, just make tracks fer home, get ye'r horse and what money yer kin raise, and light out fer ther Wild West, for that dead man was my husband, we having been married a few weeks ago secretly, and I'll get his fortune as his widow, while I'll spend a big sum to send you to the gal-lows fer killing him."

"Boy pard, she scared me, and I took her advice, though I tell yer Satan fought hard within me ter kill her."

"Waal, my poor mother didn't last very long after I had gone, and she was laid by the side of my father."

"The old farm was sold, but a few thousands over were put in bank for me, though I have never caimed it—maybe never will."

"And the wicked woman?"

"She got her husband's fortune and left soon after, having put all into cash, and I have not heard from the old place for ten years—never want ter ag'in."

"And your brother?"

"Ah, yes, it was my brother Jack that ye'r dog kilt."

"He had tarned road-agent, and was ther lieutenant of ther Mounted Miners, for they called him Wild Jack."

"Yer see, he went ter ther bad fer a woman's sake, while I—Waal, I'm a honest man, but look at me now, only a stage driver of ther Overland, when I were born a gent, educated, and was hoping for a bright future."

"But my hopes is wrecked, boy pard."

"But whar' is ye'r dog, fer I hain't seen him since he started on ahead."

"I don't know, but he's all right, and—"

"Hands up, Joe Jarvis, and answer for the life of Wild Jack!"

The voice rang out sternly from the side of the road, and four masked men stepped into view with rifles leveled at the Overland driver and his boy pard.

The dog patrol had given no warning of danger.

CHAPTER III.

THE YANKEE BOY PLAYS A BOLD GAME.

What Joe Jarvis would have done under the circumstances, he had not time to consider.

A driver of the Overland for years, he well knew how fatal it was for him to resist the road-agents, when they had the "drop" on him.

Did he see any chance to escape, or run the gantlet, he would have done so, but with four rifles leveled at him there was

apparently certain death to follow an attempt at resistance.

But the youth by his side was not governed by the same considerations.

There were four outlaws, it was true, but against them were Joe Jarvis, himself and two men in the coach.

In his ignorance of border ways, his pluck and impetuosity, he saw matters about equal for both sides.

Just as the words of the outlaw leader had caught his ears, he had picked up his rifle from the top of the coach to change its position, so he had it in hand when the demand came to halt, and his shot was the first one to ring out.

Joe Jarvis was a man who thought quickly and acted with his thoughts, and when he saw the youth's bullet drop the leader, he yelled to his horses and dropped the lash upon the backs of the whole team in one curling, snake-like motion he knew so well how to do.

And this, too, before there had been an answering shot, while also to help along such a recklessly bold act on the part of the Yankee lad, with a savage, thunderous bark, the giant dog plunged from the thicket upon a second one of the outlaws, bearing him backward to the earth.

There were two rifles cracked together, then, one aimed at Joe Jarvis, the other at the youth.

The first tore through the driver's leg, the other cut half an inch into the boy's shoulder, but did not prevent his pulling trigger rapidly with his revolver, while the two outlaws, utterly amazed at the sudden turn of affairs against them, turned and rushed for the cover of the pine thicket behind them.

A loud whistle and call then were given by Ned Osmond for his dog, and as the coach rolled on he came dashing after it, while the two outlaws fired rapidly after the flying stage, several of the bullets pattering against it, but doing no further damage.

"A close call, that, boy pard, but don't take such chances again, for it couldn't win a second time," said Joe Jarvis, still keeping his horses at a run.

"I thought the odds were in our favor, as we were four, and on the coach."

"No, one man of nerve often holds up a whole coach-load, driver and all, for we reason out here that he has the advantage, and men generally are cowed when held up."

"Now, I'll bet big money them two men inside is as badly scared as ther two wimmin folk be."

"I'll jist see, for them fellers got all they wanted, and a overdose, too, so they won't foller us," and Joe drew his horses to a halt and listened.

There was no sound of following hoofs, and Joe called out:

"Inside ther huss' thar'."

"Are they coming?" asked a man's voice, all in a tremor, while a second voice, fully as frightened, called out:

"Drive on, driver, for Heaven's sake, or we will all be massacred."

With a wink at the youth, Joe said:

"I'm badly wounded, and my boy pard has got a bullet in his shoulder, so I has got ter halt, but maybe you had better light out ahead and we'll pick you up ef the outlaws don't kill us."

The doors of the coach flew open with startling promptness at this, and a man sprang out on either side, his grip in hand.

"We'll send aid back to you, driver," cried one.

"Yes, I'll return at the head of a band of men," the other called out.

"Say! Hain't yer goin' ter take ther ladies along?" Joe asked.

"The robbers will not hurt them,"

shouted back one of the men as the two ran rapidly along the trail.

"I, for one, will not go with them, sir," said a feminine voice, and a woman, heavily veiled, stepped out of the coach, while a young and pretty girl also sprang out and said:

"If you are wounded, can I not help you?"

Joe Jarvis gave a whoop, and cried:

"What did I tell yer, boy pard?"

"Them two men is pushing the breeze for Mountain City, scared almost out o' their wits, while ther leddies is as plucky as ther others ought ter be."

"They dropped down on the bottom of the coach when the firing began, though we urged them to help you," said the young girl.

"It was a bold act to attempt to run by the outlaws, though it saved us our money," the veiled lady said.

"It were ther doin' o' this narvy kid, leddies, fer he did it."

"But you are both wounded?" the young girl said, anxiously.

"I got a bullet through my leg, and ther boy got clipped in ther shoulder—guess neither one hain't so bad; but thar' is a spring yonder, and we'll see if we can't patch 'em up and then go on fer Mountain City, though it's doubtful ef we ever ketches them gents as has started ahead so brisk," and Joe Jarvis laughed as heartily as if he had never known what danger was, and was not then suffering from a wound.

CHAPTER IV.

JOE'S FAIR PASSENGERS.

The wound of Joe Jarvis was an ugly gash just above the knee, the bullet having cut its way out, while the youth had a slight wound in the tip of his left shoulder.

Both were bound up by the veiled lady, and then, as the youth started off to see if he could find his dog, which he had seen start after the coach from the scene of the hold up, the young girl asked Joe Jarvis who he was.

"Now I has heard his name, and I guesses it be his right one, as I don't believe he has any reason, miss, ter hide it, only I don't remember jist now."

"He says he is a boy tramp from Boston, a Yankee lad, and he come out here on business of his own, whatever it might be, and he's a dandy, you kin bet, for he hain't been on ther border over a week, and this are ther fifth scrimmage he hev' been in, and we owes it to him thet we wasn't robbed, and I sees you leddies looks well fixed, while I hes a big sum o' money in my box belonging to the Overland Company, and going out ter Mountain City ter pay off ther men's wages fer ther quarter."

"Yes, I heard you had a snug sum along, and I am glad to know it—hands up, driver!"

It was the veiled lady who spoke, and she covered Joe Jarvis with a revolver, while, glancing at the young girl, the driver saw that she also had a weapon leveled at his heart, while her finger rested upon the trigger and her really beautiful face wore a smile that was very threatening.

Never in the whole space of his frontier life, in all of his adventures upon the Overland trail, had Joe Jarvis been so completely downed.

He gave a look from the face of the young girl to the one hidden under the veil, and then said, with a smile:

"Yer plays y'er leetle joke well, leddies, but it's too serious to do so when ther real road-agents is so near at hand."

"This is no joke, but dead earnest."

"We came to get that money box you carry, and though the bunglers back on the trail missed it a while since, we'll play a winning hand this time—if you move I will kill you!"

"Hold out your hands!"

The veiled woman spoke in a tone there was a decided threat in, and Joe Jarvis could but obey, for both women covered him with their revolvers.

"Kill him if he crooks a finger!" came the order from beneath the veil, and with great cleverness as she spoke she clasped a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of the almost dazed driver.

Then she disarmed him, and, taking a stake rope from one of the wheel horses, she quickly bound poor Joe to a tree.

Then she mounted to the box, opened it and found there the iron chest that held the money.

With a key she had taken from her pocket she opened it, the money was put in a bag brought along for the purpose, and, throwing it across her shoulder, she sprang to the ground and said quietly:

"I have it all—come, pard."

With the same sweet smile upon her lips, the young girl kissed her hand in farewell to Joe Jarvis, and the two set off at a brisk step along the trail, going toward Mountain City.

Joe Jarvis watched them until they were out of sight, and then, with an oath, by the utterance of which he seemed almost choked, he said:

"Well, of all things I ever heerd happen to me, thet is ther worst."

"Held up by two women, one wearin' a mask, t'other with a face sweet enough fer a angel."

"Thet knocks ther last prop from under me thet held up my love o' ther fair sex."

"Who is they and whar' gone?"

"I'm knocked clean out, and when I tell ther boy he'll hev' fits—I'll call him."

Raising his voice, Joe Jarvis gave a long, loud, clear hail.

It was answered at once from just over the hill, and soon after Ned Osmond came in sight and by his side was his dog, but going on three legs.

When Ned approached he saw the driver leaning against the tree, and he called out:

"They wounded Chum, also, Pard Joe, but not badly."

"He was in the trail, apparently watching to see if they were to follow, so he could come on and warn us, but—what on earth is the matter?"

"I'm a prisoner, boy pard."

"A prisoner?"

"Ah! The outlaws have been here; yes, and have kidnapped the ladies."

"I wish to Heavens they had done so, boy pard; but jist untie this stake rope and I'll tell yer about it, and it's ther hardest blow I hev' hed for many a long year."

Ned Osmond quickly set the driver free, but he could not get the irons off his wrists, and said:

"I'll have to drive, Joe, and I've handled the reins some in Mexico; but you can direct me."

"Let me help you up to the box, and I'll give Chum a boost up, too, and then we'll push on, for I confess I am completely upset at what you tell me, and my word for it those men are in it with the women."

"Think so, boy pard?"

"Sure, for those women have gone on ahead to join them."

"It was a most clever and daring scheme."

"Yes, and I was hoping they would join us on ahead and say it was all a joke."

"No, my poor pard, it war' no joke, for the women were armed; one had a key to fit the strong box, and those manacles you have on—it was all a put up job, and I want to know what Buffalo Bill will say?"

"So does I; but let us be off, for I is anxious ter make up lost time, and if you catches on ter drivin' as yer did ter fightin', yer kin run ther old huss' inter Mountain City same as I c'u'd."

The dog was helped up to the top of the coach, Joe Jarvis clambered up with an effort, and then Ned Osmond followed, seized the reins, and the team was started once more upon the trail.

CHAPTER V.

THE SECRET BETWEEN THEM.

Ned Osmond gathered up the reins over the six horses like one who was not a stranger to driving, and with cleverness, common-sense and daring would soon learn.

The dog lay on the top of the coach, and, though wounded, had his eyes and ears open on the alert for danger.

Joe Jarvis sat on the box, suffering with the wound in his leg, yet with his feelings completely subdued by what had happened.

"My heart pains me more, boy pard, than does my leg," he muttered.

His manacled hands were clasped before him, and he seemed to be lost in deepest meditation, until suddenly Ned Osmond put his foot hard down on the brake, and drew rein, with the remark:

"See there, Joe!"

He pointed to the trail, and there were visible some fresh tracks made by shod horses.

"You are right, boy pard, here is where them fellers waited for them road-agent gals."

"You is beginning to read signs like a borderman, for I hadn't noticed them tracks."

"You were not looking. But how many horses do you think were here, and do you see those boot heels?"

"Yes, thar' be leetle feet and big ones—here is whar' they hed some one waitin' fer 'em, and thar' is ther tracks of half a dozen critters, if not more."

"But what on 'arth is them road-agent gals doin' in this country, and whar' is they going?"

"I give it up; and I've one for you, Joe."

"Let her fly."

"Were the four in the coach the companions of the four who held us up back on the ridge?"

"You have got me, boy pard."

"Well, I don't know, but would like to."

"See, they go off in that direction, and if Chum was not wounded we could soon find where, for he could track them on a scent a day old."

"Waal, we is not able ter do it now, so I says we goes ahead ter Mountain City and starts ther Vigilantes out on ther trail."

Ned drove on again, and for some time did not reply.

Then he said:

"Pard Joe!"

"Waal, boy pard."

"Who are the Vigilantes?"

"They are some thirty or forty of ther miners that is banded ter keep things straight in Mountain City."

"Do they do it?"

"Waal, they lifts a man with hemp now and then."

"Sometimes getting the wrong man?"

"Waal, I has know'd 'em ter do thet, too."

"The Mounted Miners are a band of outlaws banded for robbing?"

"That's what."

"Nobody knows just who they are?"

"No."

"But you recognized a miner in the man I killed some days ago, Buffalo Bill discovered another miner among the three outlaws who were trying to ambush him, and the gang that were going to hang me said openly that one of the slain outlaws was their comrade."

"Now, Joe, we don't know but that even among the Vigilantes there may be several outlaws, and I am going to suggest a plan, if you'll let me."

"Jist fire away, for you've got a mighty level head, boy pard."

"Tell your agent, or boss, the truth about the four passengers, but keep it a dead secret to all else."

"I jist don't git hold of ye'r meanin', boy pard."

"My idea is to tell that we were held up by road-agents, and that you and I, and my dog are wounded there is proof, and I am pretty sure that two of the outlaws went under."

"Now the women who were in the coach got the boodle, and the two men who played scared were their pards beyond a doubt."

"You is about trampin' ther right trail, pard."

"Well, what is the use of speaking of the two women or the men; jist let it be thought that the road-agents robbed you."

"I think you is about right."

"I don't want to give it away that two petticoats held me up?"

"Not exactly that, for a revolver is as dangerous in a woman's hands as in a man's, and I would just as soon be killed on purpose as by accident, it's all the same."

"The women downed you, for they were clever in their way of playing their game, and you never looked for treachery."

"But if you report to all that the women did it, why, the Vigilantes may have men among them who will post the outlaws, and somehow I don't connect the four passengers with the four who held the coach up."

"I believe you is about right."

"Now, I wish to go at once to the fort, upon reaching Mountain City, and report the affair to Buffalo Bill, and we'll know just what to do, you may be sure."

"Boy pard, it shall be as you say, and we'll keep the thing a secret about the women holdin' me up; in fact, I feel kinder 'shamed ter let it be known I wilted afore a gun in a girl's hand."

"Yas, Buffalo Bill is the man ter go on ther trail, and you go to ther fort; but yer is not ter start afore dawn ter-morrer, for there be ug'y men in the mountains, and some of 'em won't forgit yer, and thet Buffalo Bill rescued you from a lot of 'em, and yer must keep ye'r eyes open fer danger."

"I will be constantly on the watch, Joe," was the youth's reply, and he sent the team along at a more rapid pace, for he could see that the driver was suffering greatly with his wound.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOSS OF MOUNTAIN CITY.

The young driver handled the reins with a skill that won much praise from Joe Jarvis, and it was a little before the time when the coach was due that it began to climb the last hill on the way up to Mountain City.

Ned Osmond had a curiosity to see the place known as Mountain City, for, whatever was the mysterious mission which had brought him to the Wild West, and which he kept so well locked up in his own breast, that had been the destination he had aimed for.

Pretentious in name, Mountain City was in reality a collection of camps, some dozen little villages of log cabins, with scattering huts between, and all centering about a central point where there were a stage station, stables, a tavern, blacksmith shop, several stores, and half a dozen combination saloons and gambling dens.

A population of half a thousand miners encircled the village proper, and there were to be found men of all kinds, classes, nationalities and characters.

Scattered over a space of ten miles square, the miners were wont to congregate at nightfall toward the central point where the stores and saloons were.

Twice a week they got a mail, and on the nights when the stage came in there was a larger crowd than usual.

The head man in Mountain City was the stage boss, Luke Leathers, and he was the right man in the right place, being a bright fellow, knowing the country, understanding the characters with whom he had to deal, and utterly fearless.

A man with less nerve than Luke Leathers possessed would not have held the position he did one week, for he would have been killed.

There were those who said that Luke was a man-killer, but he had had this questionable title forced upon him by the necessities of the work he had to do when he first took charge in Mountain City.

He had been a soldier, then a scout, and next a stage driver, and he was appointed by the Overland Company because his worth was recognized.

Luke Leathers was not only stage boss, but he was landlord of the Good Cheer Inn, the proprietor of the largest store in the settlement, owned the blacksmith shop, was postmaster, and had a saloon and gambling den as well.

Altogether, Luke managed to handle about half the money that circulated in Mountain City, and was looked upon as the richest man in the mines.

With his stage force, two blacksmiths, tavern help, store clerks and saloon-keepers, Luke Leathers had what he called his "Regulators," something over a score of men, whom he could call on when needed to keep order in Mountain City, when the miners got too wild, which was sometimes the case.

He was a man over six feet in height, erect as an Indian, an athlete in build and strength, and one who could handle a revolver or knife with deadly effect when needed.

Long blond hair, blue eyes, with black lashes, a complexion that a woman would envy, a frank, cheery expression, and a picturesque costume, half military, half sport, made up a man of striking appearance, and one whose word was law in Mountain City, while he was both liked and hated, admired and feared.

Climbing up the long, steep trail to the Good Cheer Tavern, Ned Osmond handled the reins well, while a score of men called out to Joe Jarvis to know if he was going to retire from the Overland, and was "breaking in a cub" to take his place.

Joe held his manacled hands down in his lap, to hide that he was ironed, and paid no heed to the calls or comments, save when a pard spoke pleasantly to him, when he as politely responded.

The Good Cheer was a large log cabin with wings on either side and a building running back in the rear, and which was dining room and kitchen.

Over the rear building were a dozen sleeping rooms, all that were needed, and they were bare of furniture other than cot beds and benches, for the guests could go down to the piazza to "wash up," where there were soap and towels.

Two rooms were quite well furnished for

adies, or distinguished guests, and with Lucky Luke's room, for so he was nicknamed, the saloon, office and gambling den, the Good Cheer was complete.

The office was in the center, and implied hotel and stage office, post office and Luke Leathers' private "dive," as the boys called his retiring room, over which was the printed sign:

"NO ADMITTANCE HERE UNDER PAIN OF DEATH."

It was here Luke kept his "arsenal," his money-box, books and papers, and men in Mountain City there were who knew that the sign was no idle threat, for cut into the thick door with a penknife were the names of three persons, with the legend:

"Departed this life on this spot for not heeding the above sign."

Here was seen a hand with the index finger pointing up to the sign, and the dates that the men had "departed this life on."

There were bullet marks in the door, too, and some suspicious red stains on it and upon the floor.

But Lucky Luke had never been the one to set the bullets flying, and it was only when some of the worst men in the camp sought to crowd him in his sanctum that, after full warning, he would "call them down," as the boys said.

The truth was, Luke was a magistrate, secretly a Government detective, United States marshal, and had money and property to guard, and did it.

When the coach halted before the Good Cheer, Luke Leathers, handsome, picturesque-looking, and with a smile, called out:

"Welcome back, Joe. But have you opened a kindergarten on the Overland?" and he glanced at Ned, while Joe replied:

"It's ther lad I told yer of, Cap'n Luke, thet they called up at ther fort Little Buffalo Bill."

"Ah, I remember, and I am glad to meet you, Buffalo Bill, Junior, for the stage company owes you a lasting debt of gratitude. Dismount and come in, for you are my guest. Why, Joe, what is the matter?" and Luke Leathers for the first time saw that the driver was in trouble.

"We met ther Mounted Miners this run ag'in, thet's all," was Joe's laconic reply.

CHAPTER VII.

NIGHT-HAWK GEORGE.

Both Ned Osmond and Luke were at once taken to Luke Leathers' private office, while the stage hands took the coach.

The doctor of Mountain City was as good a borderman as he was a physician and surgeon, and a character in his way.

A slender, tall, well-formed man, with a darkly-bronzed, poetic face, lustrous, deep-set eyes, and a calm dignity in manner and words, he was one of the very few in Mountain City who was not joked by the miners.

There was that about George Powell that held men aloof, yet one and all liked and respected him.

To the miners he was known as "Night-Hawk George," though he was generally spoken of as "the doctor," for he was the only one in the mines.*

Doctor Powell was near at hand, and soon entered the office, when Luke Leathers said to him:

"Doc, just overhaul Joe, there, and this youth—Little Buffalo Bill—they call him at the fort—and don't forget the dog, for they met the Mounted Miners on the way."

"I've got to open the mail, but sing out if you need me."

Night-Hawk George was dressed in buck-

skin, a complete suit, top boots, a woolen shirt, and slouch hat.

He was a handsome man, one to command attention anywhere.

With a gentle, courteous manner he greeted Joe Jarvis, and then the youth, remarking quietly:

"I have heard of you, my boy, from what you did on Joe's last run."

"So you have had more trouble, eh?"

"A little, sir; but I got off well, though I fear Joe is badly wounded."

"We shall soon see."

With a touch as gentle as a woman's, and the skill of an experienced surgeon, Night-Hawk George unwrapped the bandages and laid the wound bare.

"Ugly looking, but not so bad as it looks, Joe."

"You got it when you were sitting down."

"I did, doc; but I guess it won't stop me from driving."

"Not you, no; though it would put many a man to bed. But what about these irons?"

"Oh, I got them put on me near about the same time."

"The boy here got one of the gang, his dog choked another into the happy hunting grounds, and—well, they were too much for us, and got the strong-box."

Just then the blacksmith came in to take the irons off, and it was quickly done, after which George Powell dressed Joe's wound most skillfully, and then turned to Ned, who said:

"My dog first, sir, if you please, for mine is a scratch."

Chum showed that he knew a friend when he met one, and held his paw out to be examined.

The wound was not a bad one, and was as carefully dressed as had been the driver's, after which it was bound up securely.

Then came Ned's wound, which he had regarded as a mere clip on the shoulder.

"The bullet is in there, my boy. I must probe for it."

Ned Osmond did not flinch under the operation, and the bullet was taken out, while George Powell said:

"This could not be done again in a thousand shots, for one bullet cut the flesh and passed on, while a second struck in the wound made by the first, and entered."

"Half an inch further, and it might have been fatal. You are a plucky fellow, and deserve the name they have given you of Little Buffalo Bill, not only on account of your nerve, but you look like Cody."

"Come and see me, for my cabin is up the trail a few hundred yards," and Night-Hawk George took his departure.

Ned was as much pleased to find that Joe Jarvis and Chum were not badly wounded as he was that he was not.

He had enjoyed looking about him in the den of Captain Luke, for it was carpeted with the skins of wild beasts, grizzly bears, buffaloes, wildcats, mountain lions and deer.

There were elk, deer, antelope and mountain sheep's heads upon the walls, Indian trophies, a skeleton, human skulls, scalp-locks, and weapons galore, with lariats, saddles, and bridles.

The room was fully thirty feet square, and stoutly built of logs, with small windows opening outside, and a door into the main building, the light coming from a trap in the roof.

"Well, Little Bill, this is my den, and you are welcome here any time, so don't make a stranger of yourself."

"I'll show you your room, and you can take your traps there, and Joe and I will look you up for supper."

"I heard you had some trouble on your way here last time, but I guess the men

won't crowd you again, but if they do they'll have to deal with Luke Leathers," and the boss led the way to Ned's room, which was one of the two choice ones, set apart for distinguished guests.

Choice as it was, it was a very barren and desolate home, but Ned Osmond was not one to kick, and he set about making himself comfortable, for he was determined to make Mountain City his headquarters for a while at least.

Returning to his office, Captain Luke had a long talk with Joe Jarvis, and learned the true story of the hold-up.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YANKEE BOY'S WELCOME.

Captain Luke seemed intensely interested in the story of the double hold-up told him by Joe Jarvis.

He could not exactly understand how the women passengers had taken such a bold part in the game, and had Joe go all over it again.

When he had the facts and had been told what Ned Osmond had suggested, he said:

"A good idea, indeed!"

"That boy has a wonderfully clever head on his young shoulders, and I'll tell you what I'll do, Joe."

"Yas, cap'n."

"We won't give out that you were robbed, but let the people think that you fought your way through, so if it gets out that the money was taken, it of course comes from the outlaws themselves, and we must discover just who found it out."

"The boy said that would be a good idea to spot them."

"It is, and I'll pay the wages out of my own funds, for all knew the money was coming this trip."

"You won't pay me, and, what's more, as it was a couple of gals as held me up, and got ther boodle, I've got enough dust laid by in your hands, Cap'n Luke, to pay the loss to ther company."

"Don't be a fool, Joe, for you could do no more than you did."

"We'll get that back, or we'll get scalps to pay for it, especially as the boy is going for Buffalo Bill."

"Of course, Cody must not come here just now, but go to the scene and act from there."

"You will go out on your next run, I take it?"

"You bet I will."

"Well, the malfest will show me the amount of money taken—here it is—just three thousand, nine hundred dollars, so I'll call all hands up to-morrow and pay off, and you take yours with the rest."

"Won't do it."

"Take it openly, if you return it in private."

"I'll call Doctor Night-Hawk in to-night and the boy can start for the fort just before he can be trusted under all circumstances."

"You bet he can, and Night-Hawk's word goes, for he knows what is what in this wild life, as he does in medicine and wound fixin'."

"Well, we'll talk it all over to-night, and the boy can start for the fort just before dawn, to get out of the camps by day-break."

"It is a good idea."

"He has his horses here, you left with me."

"Yas, cap'n, and his saddle, bridle and outfit we had with us on the hearse, but his dog can't go."

"No, I can keep him here with me."

"Maybe."

The gong was then heard, rung by a Chinaman, who enjoyed making the horrid din, and Captain Luke sought Ned,

* "Nighthawk George"—Doctor George Powell, a physician of La Crosse, Wis., and a man whose life has been remarkable for its romance and thrilling adventures.—The Author.

Osmond, and with Joe Jarvis went in to supper.

The boss had his own table, where he entertained passengers and special guests, and there always sat Joe Jarvis and Night-Hawk George Powell, who took his meals at the Good Cheer.

It was said of the boss that he never told a lie to any one, or implied one, and he kept up this record with his hotel, for the name did not belie it, as his table was the best that could be set in that region.

Captain Luke was a good liver himself, and he kept several men out hunting and fishing all the time for game and fish.

He had a German settler over in the valley raising vegetables, and his wife caring for a large chicken yard and dairy, while his store was well supplied with bacon, hams and groceries not expected to be found out there.

So the supper at the Good Cheer gladdened the heart of Ned Osmond, who, boy-like, kept his healthy appetite constantly with him.

"Muchee Little Billee Buffalo," said the Chinaman waiter, Hop Along, when he saw Ned, and he seemed much pleased in obeying Captain Luke's instructions to "stuff him," Ned meanwhile enjoying the stuffing process.

Half a hundred miners took their meals at the Good Cheer, and Ned Osmond had a chance to see just what wild life was in a border mining camp.

In turn, he was the object of general attention, yet he took his notoriety quietly.

All had heard of Joe's last run, the hold-up of the youth, his going to the fort, meeting Buffalo Bill, saving the great scout from an ambush, his brush with Indians, and narrow escape from hanging on his way to Mountain City, going with the Overland driver, and the second hold-up on the return.

So he was a young hero, even in the eyes of those stern men, and when they looked at his handsome, fearless, boyish face, and knew that he had been called Little Buffalo Bill, quick to recognize nerve and pluck, the whisper went the rounds to give him a welcome, and all waited until the last man had finished his supper, when one voice called out:

"Three cheers for the Boss Boy, Little Buffalo Bill!"

They were given with a roar like a crash of thunder, and Hop Along, who did not hear the words, but met the cry as he came in with a huge coffee pot in hand, dropped it in terror and fled, hastened by oaths and shots sent after him by two men the hot coffee had scalded.

But Hop Along hopped fast enough to escape the bullets, and stampeded the whole kitchen brigade as he fled yelling through on his way to safety.

As for Ned, he was startled by the furore in his honor, and, rising, bowed politely, and said, in his clear, resonant voice:

"I thank you, gentlemen."

After supper Captain Luke told Doctor Night-Hawk and Ned to come with Joe Jarvis and himself to the office, and there the whole story of the holdup was gone over again, and it was decided that Little Buffalo Bill should start for the fort before dawn in the morning.

CHAPTER IX.

NED'S SHADOWER.

Ned Osmond was called in time for his ride to Fort Vidette, some forty miles distant.

He found one of the horses he had captured from the outlaws, in his first experience with those worthies, saddled and ready for him, and a good animal it was.

With his own weapons, and a bag of

provisions, put up for him by Captain Luke's orders, he expected no difficulty in reaching the fort on time, as he had been over the trail once.

Hop Along had orders to show the youth out of the camps to the trail for the fort, Captain Luke having retired, and Joe Jarvis having gone early to bed.

The youth rode away from the Good Cheer fully equipped for a stay of some days, if necessary, and Hop Along guided him through the darkness and along the deserted trails.

"Here Melican boy all O. K."

"Trail takee allee lightee," said the Chinaman, halting where he came out in the well-defined trail to the fort.

Ned thanked Hop Along, slipped a dollar in his hand, and started on his way.

It was not yet dawn, but he recognized the cabin where the men dwelt, who, but for Buffalo Bill's timely arrival, would have hanged him.

All was dark and silent there, but the tree which was to have been his gallows Ned Osmond rode by with a shudder, as it was pictured in his mind, never to be erased.

After going a couple of miles upon the trail the gray of dawn began to lighten, and the boy was about to quicken his pace when he heard the sound of hoofs behind him.

Instantly he drew rein, not knowing whom he had to meet, and in the dim light he beheld the form of a horseman.

Determined to await his approach, rather than have a man behind him, for several times before he thought he had heard hoof falls, Ned was surprised to hear the sharply given command:

"Move on as before."

"Do not mind me, for I am following you for a purpose."

There was something in the voice that caused Ned to at once obey, and he rode on, urging his horse to an easy canter.

Looking behind him several times as the day brightened, he failed to see any one, though the trail was winding then, the timber thick and the way rugged, so that he could not see far behind him.

But several times when he halted to listen, he heard faintly the sound of hoofs.

Who was it that was thus following him, he wondered.

Was he being shadowed for good or evil?

Unable to answer the question he asked himself, he rode quietly on his way, feeling that it was certainly a most unpleasant situation to be thus "followed for cause," when he could not understand what the cause could be.

Coming to a long, winding and narrow canyon, through which the trail ran, Ned remembered what a good place he had considered it for an ambush when he passed through it on his way from Fort Vidette to Mountain City.

But who was there that knew of his intended ride to the fort, and knowing, who was there to follow him?

The walls of the canyon arose on either side over a hundred feet above his head, and it looked like a mighty chasm splitting a range of hills in twain.

In fact, that was just what it was, and the canyon was not over twenty feet wide in its narrowest places, and a hundred feet at its widest.

It was about two hours after leaving Mountain City, and Ned Osmond considered that he was about ten miles from the camps.

The end of the canyon was at hand, and he could see a pretty valley before him.

Suddenly, as he neared the end of the canyon, apparently from the clouds, a stern, commanding voice cried out:

"Lie low, there, you murderers, for have you covered!"

Ned's horse was startled, and, squatting low, wheeled quickly to the right, about to run away.

But Ned was a splendid rider and kept his seat, and, checking his horse, he brought his rifle around for use, for though not appropriate to him, it seemed that the command must be meant for him.

This movement of the horse had been but the work of a couple of seconds, and when he had faced the music again, so to speak, the boy saw that he was not the one to whom the command from above had been addressed.

Just at the end of the canyon, on the left, there was a large boulder that had fallen from the cliff above at some remote period.

It was capable of concealing a dozen men, and commanded the trail both ways, in the canyon and the approach to it.

Behind that boulder was the man, or men, to whom the words had been addressed:

"Lie low, there, you murderers, for I have you covered!"

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS FRIEND.

Ned could not see who it was behind the boulder, but a glance upward showed him a man's head and shoulders peering over the cliff, and he held a rifle that pointed straight down at some one who was lying in hiding there.

Why should they be there but to be in ambush for him?

Who were they and how many were there?

Who was the solitary man upon the cliff, or were there others besides that one?

Was it his strange shadower, and was he there to protect him?

If his shadower, then he had ceased to follow, had taken to the range and headed him off, for a purpose.

His face he could not see, for the rifle stock and arms concealed it.

But the weapon was pointed with evidently deadly intent at some one behind that rock.

These thoughts flashed through Ned's brain in a few seconds of time.

He kept his eyes upon the boulder and was ready to defend himself.

Then came another command from the cliff top, and it was in the same terse, determined tone as before:

"Flat on your faces, all three of you, and quick about it!"

These words told Ned that the eyes of the man on the cliff rested upon three persons behind the boulder.

If they were his foes, the odds were big against him, he knew.

Even in that moment of suspense and danger it flashed across the boy's mind that the outlaws of that country generally traveled in trios.

Then Ned heard quickly a shot from behind the boulder, and saw a shower of dust fly from the cliff where the bullet struck, but he had no time to consider how close a call it was for the man up there before a stream of fire poured out of his rifle and a wild yell followed it.

Then came the words:

"Down, both of you, or die!"

The men evidently obeyed, for quickly followed the words:

"I have a repeating rifle here and will kill you if you do not obey—ah! you are wise—raise your hands above your heads as you lie thus, and make no move if you value your lives!"

Ned was more than interested,

So far the man on the cliff had seemed to befriend him, and yet he knew he had him at his mercy as thoroughly as he did the men in ambush.

That he was in deadly earnest, his having fired upon one man proved.

That he had kept him, by that shot, from being longer dangerous, his remark, afterward addressed to but two, seemed to indicate.

Thus Ned sat upon his horse in suspense, his rifle in hand.

It was but a moment, yet it seemed to be many of them.

Then the silence was broken by the man on the cliff again speaking.

This time it was Ned whom he addressed.

He said, calling out in the same terse, commanding tones he had before spoken in:

"Those three men behind that bowlder learned in some way you were to take the trail for Fort Vidette this morning, and they planned to ambush and kill you."

"That they did so proves that they are, though known as miners, really outlaws, and they were among the gang who sought to hang you."

"One is dead; the other two are your prisoners, so tie them securely while I keep them covered."

"Their horses are about a couple of hundred yards away in a thicket to the right."

"When they are secure, make them mount, tie them to their saddle horns, and strap the dead man to his saddle."

"Then take the outfit to Colonel Benham and tell him the circumstances of their capture."

"I will, sir, thank you," answered Ned, and he hastened to obey the instructions given him by his rescuer on the cliff.

Dismounting, he hitched his horse and then went around behind the bowlder.

The two men still lay there flat on their faces, their arms extended above their heads.

The third man was dead.

Ned hastily disarmed them, and with the lariat of one of the men securely bound their hands behind them.

He glanced up and saw the man on the cliff still at his post, so called out:

"I will get their horses now, sir, if you will still keep them covered:

"All right, go ahead!"

Ned soon found the horses hitched in the thicket, and he led them back to the bowlder.

Aiding one man to mount he tied him to his saddle and then told the other that it was his turn.

He, too, was bound to his saddle horn, and Ned's next move was to raise the dead body across the saddle of his horse and make it fast.

"All ready, now, sir."

"Who shall I tell Colonel Benham was my rescuer and sent him these prisoners?"

But no answer came and no one was now visible upon the cliff.

Ned called, but received no response.

The mysterious friend had disappeared.

CHAPTER XI.

MEETING THEIR MATCH.

Ned Osmond had a strange feeling come over him at the discovery that his mysterious friend had gone.

He was in a land of strange deeds, a land of mystery, but he had pluck enough, and to spare, to meet any difficulty.

But why should a man help him and not let him know who he was.

"Ah! he has gone around the ridge to come into the valley here."

"I will wait for him," he said.

Then it occurred to him that if the man had intended to join him he would not have told him to go on to the fort.

"No, he does not wish me to know who he is."

"I remember that he said he was following me for a purpose, for he is the one who shadowed me, I feel sure."

"Now, for some good purpose he understands and I do not, he keeps out of sight."

"I will go on."

Thus making up his mind, Ned was about to start upon his way when the two men called to him.

They were hard-looking fellows, the three of them, but death had canceled the ill-will Ned felt against one of them.

Two of them he recognized, the one that was dead and one of the living.

The third was a tall, lank fellow, with a stoop in the shoulders, and a reddish slouch hat on, just such form and make-up as he had seen in one of the four men who held up the coach the day before on the trail.

But the four outlaws were masked then, and only by his form, hat and general appearance could Ned now identify him.

He had a face that would pass anywhere as that of a villain.

"I say, young feller, it's nothin' ter us, but you is goin' wrong on this trail," called out one of the outlaws, while the other added:

"No, it's nothin' ter us, but yer is goin' wrong, young feller."

"I've been over this trail before."

"No doubt, and you is right as far as ther trail goes; but thar' is Injuns on it now, and ef yer wish ter git to ther fort yer better take ther old trail along ther river, though it is longer."

"Yas, it's not traveled now, and ther Injuns don't lie in wait on it; but this way we'll all be kilt afore we go far."

"How is it you were not afraid of the Indians?"

"We was."

"Yas, that's what we was lyin' thar' at thet canyon fer, when thet pard o' your'n come along and kilt poor Jim and held us up."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No."

"Have you any idea?"

"I can't guess; but we intends ter know and let ther Vigilantes deal with him, for he kilt Jim and took us in."

"Yas, and he is foolin' you ter say we war' layin' fer you."

"You did so once before, at least you did, and that man who is dead, for I recognize you as men who tried to hang me, and but for Buffalo Bill would have done so."

"Pard, young feller, yer is away off."

"I never seen yer afore in my life, and, what is more, I never cares if I don't see yer ag'in."

Ned laughed and replied:

"I guess not; but you don't fool me worth a cent."

"You is new out here, and don't know ther ways."

"Why all ther men looks alike out here."

"In the dark, yes; but, look here, my tall friend, I have seen you before also."

"Whar'?"

"You were one of the four who held up the coach yesterday and wounded Joe Jarvis; yes, and you are the very one who shot at me, I remember, but I'm hard to kill, you see."

"It wasn't me, no such thing."

"It was you, for I recall your voice now."

"I never said a word, I—"

"Who did then?"

"Bounce—did ther talk—"

"Shet up, yer telltale fool, yer!" whispered his companion, and Ned burst out into a hearty laugh and cried:

"I thought I would make you give yourself away, long legs—even as high up as your mouth is, you put your foot in it that time."

"Well, durn me fer a fool," growled the man, and Ned replied:

"I won't contradict you; but I thought I knew you."

"I don't know the ways out here, don't I?"

"Well, I admit I am a tenderfoot, only a Yankee boy, but I am not quite such a fool as I may look."

"See here, boy pard, I tell yer thet this trail will git us all kilt."

"Thar' is ther old trail, so tarn off thar', fer I knows ther way, and I hain't no wish ter be scalped."

"Is hanging an easier death to die?" quietly asked Ned, and oaths in chorus answered him.

Then the man who had before spoken returned to the attack again.

"I tells yer we was scoutin' fer Injuns when thet feller held us up, and they is thick on this trail."

"You has us secure, so why not go ther safe way to ther fort?"

"Because I am stupid enough to believe that the safe way is the one that you do not wish to go," was the Yankee boy's quiet response, with a twinkle in his eye as he spoke.

And again the two prisoners cursed him roundly.

CHAPTER XII.

DRIVEN TO BAY.

Reaching the spot where an indistinct trail branched off to the right, the men watched anxiously to see if the youth would take it.

Instead he held right on along the regular trail, and the tall fellow said:

"I bets we is all Injun meat afore an' hour."

Ned smiled, but made no reply, and after riding a mile in silence the men began to either get uneasy, or feign it, and begged hard that he would leave the trail for fear of running into an ambush.

But Ned held on as before, his eyes constantly on the lookout ahead.

"How I miss Chum," he muttered, and then he said to his prisoners:

"It is lucky for you I didn't have my dog along with me to-day, or you'd have gotten the worst of it."

"Whar is thet blamed dog, anyway?" asked the tall fellow.

"How did you know I had a dog?" Ned questioned, quickly, and added, with a laugh:

"There goes your foot in your mouth again."

Another chorus of curses, and the men lapsed into silence, until suddenly, as they rounded a bend in the trail, the two outlaws broke out into a cheer of delight.

Ned had seen the cause of their joy as quickly as they had, and at once drew rein.

What he beheld were five horsemen coming toward him, and about three hundred yards distant.

But for the exultant cries of his prisoners Ned would have thought that the five men were to be trusted.

But as friends of the two men with him he could only look upon them as foes.

"They is our pards! Now is our time to crow, young bantam."

"Yas, we is on top now."

These remarks were not very assuring to the youth.

He saw the situation at a glance, and he realized that he was in for it, so to speak.

If those horsemen were the pards of the prisoners in his keeping, he had no mercy to expect from them.

The horsemen were five in number, and had halted.

Ned now saw that they wore masks.

This settled it as to what he must expect.

He did not lose his nerve, however, and glanced around coolly to take in the situation.

He could drop his prisoners and run for it, he knew.

But the boy had a horror of doing anything he thought was cowardly.

Called Little Buffalo Bil, he wished to be worthy of the name he bore.

"Yer better light out, young feller, if yer wishes ter save ye'r neck."

"Now, look here—your joy at sight of those men told just who and what you are, and they are masked Mounted Miners, so I don't give you up without a fight now."

Ned spoke sternly, and with a ring in his voice that showed he was aroused to resistance.

In his glance about him he had seen, not far away, one of those hills of solfataria hue so often seen in the desert belt.

It was a hundred feet in height, had sloping sides and an opening in the top—a crater, in fact, for it was an extinct volcano.

The hill and its approach were as barren of vegetation as the palm of the hand, and the lava had flowed all about its base.

Instantly Ned wheeled the horses and rode for this hill.

The horsemen saw his act, and laughed, while they came on leisurely, as one of the prisoners called out:

"Come and rescue us, pards, for he's totin' us to ther fort ter hang."

"It's thet cub thet Buffalo Bill ties to?"

The horsemen heard all that was said, and the leader called back:

"We'll rescue you, pards."

"He won't go far in that direction."

It seemed that the very spot where Ned Osmond had turned off was a peninsular formed by the river making a great bend there.

As there were cliff banks all around, had Ned retreated down the bend there would have been no escape for him.

But, instead of riding down the little valley, they saw him begin to climb the hill.

Then they laughed again, and came leisurely on.

The two prisoners also laughed, and one remarked:

"Better skip while you can, boy, and leave us."

But Ned made no reply.

"I know my business, as you will find out."

The men laughed, and the horses began to mount the steep hill, over the flinty lava.

It was a rough and hard climb, but they reached the top.

Ned saw that there was no way of getting the horses in the opening, but there was space for his prisoners and himself.

"Dismount!" he said, as he untied the feet of one from under the horse.

"We declines ter," was the decided reply.

Ned smiled, and instantly tied the man's feet again, after which he took the ends of the stake ropes, sprang himself into cover, and said, quietly.

"Stay where you are, then, for you will protect me."

"Curse that boy!" cried one of the men, while the other said:

"Fer a tenderfoot, yer is about as fly as they makes 'em."

Ned made no reply, and kept his eyes upon the coming horsemen.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YANKEE BOY'S RUSE.

The masked horsemen seemed to be so sure of their game that they did not hurry in the least.

Ned watched them eagerly, saw them come within easy range of his rifle, and then, resting it upon the edge of the crater, took aim deliberately.

But the brave boy did not aim at the masked horsemen coming up the barren hill, but at one of his two prisoners seated bound upon his horse.

It was a picture that was strange and thrilling, and one that the two prisoners painfully and quickly realized the danger of.

There they sat upon their horses, bound in their saddles, their stake ropes held by their boy captor, who crouched in the crater, his rifle leveled, his finger on trigger, ready to fire, not at the five coming horsemen, but at them.

Upon one side of the prisoners was Ned's horse, upon the other the fourth animal, with the body of the dead outlaw strapped to the saddle.

The Yankee lad had been driven to bay, and his clever mind had at once discovered an opportunity to remain master of the situation.

The five masked horsemen were within three hundred feet of the crater, when the voice of the boy called to them to halt.

"If you come a step nearer, I will send a bullet through the hearts of these prisoners!" came in the clear voice of Little Buffalo Bill.

The words brought the horsemen to a very sudden halt.

Could they believe their eyes?

Could they believe their ears?

There was a tenderfoot boy at bay, and now he was going to show that he held the winning hand.

Had they heard aright? He was going to fire upon them, they supposed.

They expected that.

But no, his rifle was not aimed at them.

It covered the heart of one of the prisoners, and it was but a move from that to the other.

The dead body across the horse told them that some one had been killed.

The two bound men showed that they had been captured.

Had the boy done this alone?

Impossible.

But they halted at his stern threat.

They recognized him as the boy several had seen before.

"It's Buffalo Bill's cub!" growled one.

"Will he do it?"

"I wonder if he's got the nerve?"

"Let's try him?"

Such were the remarks made by the men.

Then there were comments as to how he had gotten the prisoners and the dead man.

"Forward!" said the leader.

But he added:

"Be ready to halt quick, for he must not kill our pards."

The five horsemen moved ahead, and loud rang the warning:

"I don't wish to kill them, but, so help me Heaven! I will!"

"One, two—"

"Halt!" cried the leader, and the five men halted with great promptness, for a cry had come from the prisoners, appealing to them.

"We'll trick him," said the leader, and he called out:

"Say, boy, we'll let you go if you leave your prisoners."

"I'll let you go, if you'll leave my prisoners alone," came the quick answer.

"We've got you foul, so you might as well come to terms."

"Oh, I'm all right; don't mind me, for

I've got grub in plenty, and rather like it up here—it's a fine view I have."

"Curse the boy!" said the leader, and all echoed his sentiments.

Then he tried it again.

"We were running from redskins, and they'll be along soon and kill you."

"You were running mighty slow, and then, I don't mind redskins—I like 'em."

"Will you give up those men?"

"I will not."

"We'll take them, then."

"If they are worth more to you dead than alive, I'll kill them for you."

"We do not wish to have them killed, but we will sacrifice their lives to catch and hang you."

Then in a loud chorus came reply:

"No yer don't! Don't mind us, but go on, for ther boy will shoot—he hain't got no better sense!"

This reply caused Ned to laugh.

He saw the ludicrous side of the situation in spite of his danger.

"The blamed fools!"

"Didn't they know I was not in earnest?" growled the leader, and he looked toward his companions to suggest a plan of action to outwit the clever lad.

"Say, boy."

"All right, man."

"Are you going to give those men up?"

"No."

"I'll corral you there, then, and starve you out."

"I'll bet you don't."

"Why?"

"I'll do some lying now," muttered Ned to himself, while he answered, in a loud tone:

"Because Colonel Benham was to send Buffalo Bill and some soldiers from the fort to-day to meet me in Mountain City and take me back, but I didn't wish to trouble them to come all the way, so I started to meet them."

"They'll be along soon, and, starve me—not much you won't, I don't think."

This very cool explanation made a decided impression.

The faces of the two prisoners looked gloomy, and the men at the base of the hill cast quick glances behind them as though looking for the coming of the party from the fort at once.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUFFALO BILL.

Ned smiled at the success of his reply, but his quick eye detected a movement among the horsemen.

Instantly he took his hat off and rested it upon a stone at the edge of the crater, while he moved his position.

Hardly had he done so, when there came several sharp reports together, and the bullets knocked the hat off the rock.

"Cuss' yer! ther boy wa'n't whar' yer shot!" yelled one of the prisoners, who had just gotten on to Ned's quick act and what the outlaws intended.

"No; I am all right."

"But try that again, and I'll kill one of these crows!" called out Ned, angrily, and then he added:

"Never mind; fire all you wish, for Buffalo Bill will hear it."

Again the outlaws cast an uneasy glance behind them, and then, to the utter amazement of Ned Osmond, they uttered cries of alarm and started away at full speed.

Instantly his rifle flashed, and an outlaw fell from the saddle.

Another shot, and a horse went down, throwing his rider heavily.

But the others halted, pulled him up to a seat behind one of their number, and fled on rapidly.

Then Ned beheld the cause of their flight, and which, from his position, he could not sooner see.

There, coming along the trail from the fort, was a horseman he could not mistake. The large roan horse was in a swift gallop, for the rider had heard shots ahead and felt that his aid was needed.

The rider was erect in the saddle, riding with the perfect ease and grace of the frontier horseman, and his rifle lay across his left arm, the stock grasped in the right hand ready for instant use.

The long, dark hair of the horseman streamed out behind as he rode, his broad-brimmed sombrero was placed jauntily upon one side of his head, his eagle eyes were glancing ahead, and his handsome face was aglow with the excitement of danger and the hope to serve some poor unfortunate.

As he came around a patch of underbrush his eyes fell upon the red hill and the horses on top, one riderless, one carrying a dead body, and two with the prisoners tied in the saddle.

The five horsemen he had seen flying away, and then one had fallen from his saddle from a shot from the hill, next a horse had gone down, but the others sped on, to quickly disappear.

Had the horseman intended to pursue he was checked in the intention by suddenly discovering a slender form appear upon the hill and hearing a shout and the words, "Bravo, Buffalo Bill!"

"It is my boy pard, and he has been corralled by outlaws," cried Buffalo Bill, as he spurred rapidly toward the hill.

"That hangs us, pard," growled one of the prisoners, as Buffalo Bill advanced toward them.

"You bet it does, for Buffalo Bill will show us no mercy, and believe all his cub says."

Ned had sprung out of the crater and called out:

"Don't ride up here; it's too rough, sir."

"I will come down," and he led the horses down the hill.

Then Buffalo Bill stood by the body of the outlaw, whom he had unmasked.

"Well, boy pard, we meet again; but whom have you there, and how did you corral them?" and Buffalo Bill warmly shook hands with the youth, who responded:

"Some game I picked up on the way, and they are bad ones."

"I'll tell you about it."

"But I thought you were with Joe Jarvis?"

"I went with him on his run east, sir, but we returned last night, Joe quite badly wounded, Chum lame from a shot, and I can hardly raise my left arm, for I got two slight wounds in it."

"My poor boy! Road-agents, of course?"

"Yes, sir; Mounted Miners."

"There were four of them, and they held us up at the same place as before."

"I've got quite a story to tell you."

"And these fellows and those that just had you corralled, no doubt, are more of the gang?"

"Yes, sir; but shall we ride back toward the fort, for I was going there, and I can tell you, as we go along, all about it."

"Yes, as soon as I strap this body to his horse, which I will catch," and leaping into his saddle, Buffalo Bill swung his lariat over his head and rode after the horse of the dead outlaw.

He soon roped him, and the body was strapped to the saddle, when the dead animal was stripped of his saddle, bridle and outfit, and it was tied upon one of the horses behind the prisoner.

"Now, boy pard, we will move," said Buffalo Bill, mounting, and the horses were driven on ahead, the prisoners being too far to catch the words of Ned Osmond as he told his story to the scout, not leaving out about how the two fair passengers had held up and robbed Joe Jarvis while he was searching for his dog.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TWO PARDS.

Buffalo Bill was a good listener, always, and he kept up a great deal of thinking while he listened.

He let Ned tell his story in his own way, from beginning to end, and never once asked a question.

Having "booked it," so to speak, in his mind, he then began to ask questions.

As though reading from copy he went over the narrative and questioned here and there as closely as a lawyer could have done.

At last he said:

"Well, boy pard, we've got the whole story down."

"Yes, sir."

"And you were on your way to see me?"

"Yes, sir; and my lie panned out the truth," and Ned laughed.

"Why were you coming to see me?"

"I thought it best, and so did Joe Jarvis, after we talked it over, and when Captain Luke and Doctor Night-Hawk were let into the secret, they also said you should know the facts, so I started for the fort."

"And you say you do not know who it was who saved you from that ambush?"

"I cannot guess, sir—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"It was you."

"It was not, I assure you. I just came from the fort, or rather left it last night and camped some dozen miles from here."

"I saw Indian signs, so concluded to post the camps and then return to the fort."

"Then the outlaws might have been right in saying I would run upon redskins upon this trail?"

"No, for they know nothing about the redskins, at least those you were with."

"The other party of five, yes, for they came from that direction, but their trail leads our way and we will find out."

"Do you think you could recognize any of those men if you saw them in the mines?"

"They were masked, you know, and I am afraid not, though I might know the voice of their leader, and his general make-up."

"Well, we will see to that later."

"Now, about those two women, for I confess that part of the story knocks me out."

"You wish me to describe them?"

"Yes."

"One was dressed in black and heavily veiled."

"It was mourning she wore, and I did not get a glimpse of her face, but her voice was youthful, and her hand, one of which she had drawn the glove off of, was small and looked like a young woman's."

"I noticed that it was bronzed like the hands of one exposed to sunshine, and there were diamond rings upon it that were very handsome."

"Diamond rings upon the hand of a woman in mourning don't go well, Ned."

"So I thought, sir, and concluded that her dress was doing all the mourning."

"You are right."

"Now the other one."

The veiled woman was tall and slender, and dressed well."

"The other was a mere girl, and mighty pretty, for even Joe said that, and he does not like women, you know."

"Some girl has buncoed him, I guess."

"Maybe so," replied Ned, and he recalled the driver's confession to him, and how cruelly he had been deceived by the woman he had loved and trusted.

But that was Joe's secret, not his, so he kept silent about it.

"They did not appear to be pards, you say, until the hold-up?"

"No, sir."

"And then?"

"They got awful thick all of a sudden, and both were most anxious to help dress Joe's wound and mine; but I helped Joe, and the young girl dressed my shoulder and did it well, too."

"The pretty one?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then?"

"I went off to look up Chum and was gone a quarter of an hour, I guess, and when I came back Joe was tied to a tree, his wrists were ironed, and the passengers were gone."

"It was remarkable."

"I could hardly believe my eyes, Mr. Cody, and Joe told me just how it was done, that the veiled woman leveled on him and the young girl clasped the bracelets on him and helped tie him."

"Then they mounted to the box, opened the iron strong box with a key they had along, lifted out the money and walked off up the trail."

"It was well done."

"It nearly broke poor Joe's heart, to think he had been held up by women."

"It was hard."

"But now about those two male passengers."

"What did they look like?"

"If I can be a judge of myself, like tenderfoots, sir."

"Don't you worry about your being a tenderfoot, boy pard, for you have passed that stage a long way."

"Tenderfoot, indeed! You can canter barefoot where an Indian pony would go lame—no, you are not a tenderfoot, Ned, not much."

The boy seemed pleased at the scout's words and said, modestly:

"I'm trying to learn, sir."

"Yes, and you are head in your class; but about those two fellows?"

"One was a well-formed man with heavy whiskers."

"The other a small man with smooth face, and both were fairly well dressed."

"They might pass for drummers in Boston, or book-agents, more like."

"Then they were tough, for I'm blessed if a book-agent didn't sell old Chief Spotted Tail a dictionary with the back of a bible sewed on it, and I captured it and gave it to the chaplain."

"He did not have a chance to look at the contents, guess he thought he knew it all, and the next day started to preach out of it at the fort."

"Why, the poor man thought he was crazy, turned red, pale, called for prayer and had a fit."

"The surgeon dosed him with whisky, and he got drunk and went to the hospital for a week, and it took a special order from the colonel to prove to him that he was not crazy—no, book-agents don't go in the Land of the Setting Sun, boy pard."

Ned laughed heartily at the scout's story and replied:

"Well, the two men might not have been as bad as that, they were only outlaws."

"They were the allies of the women, no doubt; in fact, the King Bees."

"But now the question is, who are they and where do they camp?"

"Are they in with the Mounted Miners, or are they a separate gang, playing a lone hand for that little game they won so cleverly from poor Joe?"

"Boy pard, there is work for us to do, if you wish to chip in with Buffalo Bill on the trail."

"That's just what I do want," was Ned Osmond's emphatic rejoinder.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

"Do you think you would know the man who saved you from the ambush, boy pard?" asked Buffalo Bill, as the two rode on in silence for some time after Ned's last remark.

"I am afraid not, sir, for I could not see his face; but I'll tell you one thing."

"Well?"

"It comes to me more and more that I have heard his voice before."

"You have an idea whose it was?"

"Well, sir, there was a certain ring to it that I noticed particularly, and in recalling it I had an idea that it sounded like Doctor Night-Hawk Powell's voice, raised to a high key."

"I guess you have struck it, boy pard."

"Night-Hawk has a peculiar voice, and it is just like him to protect you out of the camp, when he had reason to believe you were in danger."

"He shadowed you, and, knowing the country perfectly, drew to one side and went on ahead to where he was certain the ambush would be laid."

"From the cliff he had the fellows just where he wanted them, and it was like him not to wish to be known."

"Then, too, he may have not cared to be known in the matter for other considerations than his modesty."

"He is a splendid fellow, Joe says, and I liked him."

"He is all that, and a fine surgeon and physician as well."

"The more you see of him the more you will tie to Night-Hawk Powell."

"There are three brothers,* Joe Jarvis said."

"Yes, one of them a surgeon in the army at one of the forts north of this, and as good a scout as he is a surgeon and doctor."

"Then there is Night-Hawk George, and his younger brother, Broncho Bill Powell, who is studying medicine, mining and hunting."

"He is away from Mountain City now, off somewhere prospecting, but he makes his camp with Night-Hawk, and those who know them best have too much sense to crowd them, though they never seek trouble, and are as mild mannered as women."

"Yes, I guess it was Night-Hawk George who saved you."

"I'd like to think so, sir, and—"

Ned stopped short, as Buffalo Bill had halted and was attentively regarding the ground.

"Keep the prisoners here," he said, shortly, and rode off on a trail alone.

In ten minutes he turned back, and as he came up he said, addressing the prisoners:

"Your five pards were here holding council with the redskin chief."

"Tracks don't lie, and they are up to some cunning work."

"If they are the allies of the Indians, so are you."

"If they are allies of the Indians, they are renegades, and so are you."

"Those five men came out of Mountain City yesterday, and they came here for a purpose."

"That purpose was to meet the redskins."

"They camped last night over beyond that hill, and the redskins got there this morning, and there was a council."

"They returned to Mountain City, and the redskins are moving toward the Red Canyon valley to wait, and they have got small bands prowling about to draw the

troops in force up toward their country, and then their large band of warriors will make a strike somewhere."

"But that don't work, for I read it all as plain as my A B C."

"Come, boy pard, we must push for the fort, for there is work to be done."

The manner in which Buffalo Bill told what he had discovered and read from those discoveries fairly amazed the Yankee boy.

The scout seemed to be reading it all as though it was written down before him.

The two prisoners turned deathly pale at his words and glanced uneasily at each other.

As they moved on once more the pace was increased to double the speed they had been traveling before.

At last Buffalo Bill said:

"See yonder hill, boy pard?"

He pointed to a little hill half a mile ahead that was rugged and covered with dwarf cedars.

Upon one side was a cliff overhanging the river, and beneath this the trail ran.

The other side sloped down to the plain. Ned looked toward the hill at the scout's words, and nodded.

"Well, I have been corralled there no less than five times by Indians, and there are the graves of half a dozen soldiers on the hill, and some score of redskins."

"We will camp there for an hour, as it is noon, and then push at a gallop for the fort."

As they neared the little hill Buffalo Bill, whose eyes were sweeping the country about him, suddenly called out:

"Ride for your life, boy pard, for they are upon us!"

One glance behind him revealed to the boy that two score of mounted warriors had suddenly appeared like magic from a small canyon near the river, and were riding to cut them off before they could reach the hill.

CHAPTER XVII.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

Buffalo Bill took in the odds against them at a glance, and everything there was in their favor.

He saw that they had a quarter of a mile to ride, the Indians twice that distance.

They were retarded by their prisoners, and the two horses carrying dead bodies; the Indians were free to ride at full speed.

Some of the Indians had rifles, most of them were only armed with bows and arrows.

Once they could reach the hill they would find splendid shelter among the bowlders near the top, and an open belt all around free of trees.

It was twenty miles to the fort, and no help need be expected from there, unless a patrol of cavalry happened to be scouting about.

"Start the prisoners ahead, boy pard, while I run to yonder hill and encourage those reds to remain behind," and Buffalo Bill, leaping from his horse and leveling his rifle at once, its deadly music was heard.

Shot after shot rang out, a perfect stream of fire seemed bursting from the muzzle, and the reports mingled together until they could hardly be counted.

A pony fell; another followed; a brave toppled from his saddle—another and another—until, staggered by the fire, the redskins checked their speed, swerved from their rush, circled around out of range and came to a halt.

Then Buffalo Bill gave his wild and well known war-cry, which the Indians answered in chorus, and at once became greatly excited.

It told them who it was they had to fight and warned them to beware; but it

made them that more anxious to capture the great white chief whom they so admired, yet so dreaded.

Their swerving from their path and halt gave Buffalo Bill some precious moments, which he was not slow in taking advantage of.

Remounting his horse once more, he spurred to the front after his youthful pard.

Reaching the hill he dismounted, hitched his horse quickly, whipped out his bowie knife, quickly cut loose the weapons of the dead outlaws and of the two prisoners, which gave him four extra rifles and eight revolvers.

"Hitch the horses, Ned, behind those bowlders, while I get the arsenal ready; then unbind those fellows' hands and bring them here, for they have got to fight!" he called out.

"Ay, ay, sir," cried Ned, and he had the horses secure in a minute, and the two prisoners' feet were set free.

"Now march!" he sharply ordered.

The men obeyed, and Buffalo Bill put them in behind of a bowlder, six feet below him, but just before him.

"Now tie their feet again, Ned, and drive a stake pin down to fasten them to, and I'll give them a couple of rifles each to help hold the fort."

"We'll help you fight if you'll let us go after we stand off ther redskins."

"Yas, that's what we'll do, but not pull a trigger 'less yer does."

"Stand aside, Ned, for those fellows are going to be in our way, and I'll end it now; they are less trouble dead! We'll do the work alone!"

Up went the hands of the two men quickly, their faces showing how scared they were at Buffalo Bill's announcement. They cried lustily not to kill them, that they'd fight the whole tribe if the scout would spare them.

"Stand there, then, or kneel behind that rock. I will give you the guns, and loaded. I will watch you, and so will this youth, and if you so much as glance behind you, I'll see to it that you take the last look on earth in that glance."

"When you two fire we will not, so I'll mark the effect of your shots, and if redskins don't fall, pale faces will! Do you understand?"

The ruffians understood it all only too well.

They would be trusted with guns in their hands and forced to fight.

They wanted the Indians to win, for, as allies, they knew they would be spared.

The temptation would be great to chance a shot at the scout and the boy.

But failure?

That meant certain death, they fully realized.

But they would be governed by circumstances; so the two outlaws took the guns and turned their faces toward the redskins as ordered.

Buffalo Bill and Ned Osmond also stood ready for a fight to the death.

Buffalo Bill had his matchless repeating rifle, and knew what it could do.

Ned had his carbine and could load it with great rapidity.

The two prisoners had their rifles and the rifles of their two dead comrades.

On the rocks close by the hands of the scout and the youth were their own revolvers and those of the four outlaws.

It was a very formidable array of fire-arms for the redskins to charge upon, for a hundred shots could be fired from the weapons within a couple of minutes, if properly handled.

And all this preparation to meet the redskins had not taken five minutes.

Now the Indians were coming on, with a rush, up the hill!

*Dr. Frank Powell, late U. S. A., now Mayor of La Crosse, Wis.

Dr. George Powell, one time a noted frontiersman, now a physician in La Crosse.

William Powell, M. D., a well known physician of Wisconsin, and at one time a plainsman of note.—The Author.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEATEN BACK.

Buffalo Bill calmly took in the situation.

He saw that the Indians had spread well out, to confuse the little party, and to escape the bullets.

They must have seen that two of the six horses carried dead men, two more prisoners, and there would be but two to fight them.

But one of these was Buffalo Bill, the invincible—the White Chief of the Charmed Life!

How they wished to take their dreaded foe alive!

They were sure of their ability to do so, so they gave orders that no shots or arrows should be fired upon the little party.

They knew that the prisoners must be their allies, and it would not do to hurt them.

They felt assured that the matchless rifle of Buffalo Bill would bring down a brave—two, three, perhaps; but all must take their chances, for the capture of Buffalo Bill was worth a dozen braves.

So they came up the hill with a rush, and their wild war cries were appalling.

Buffalo Bill glanced at his boy pard to see how he stood the terrorizing cries, to discover that Ned was calm and seemed to feel no dread.

In fact, the boy was glad to be in a fight with the great scout, and had no apprehensions of the result, desperate as matters really looked.

"You two men there—attention!"

"Take good aim, one to the right, the other to the left—fire!"

The two rifles of the outlaws flashed almost as one.

A pony went down, with his rider.

"Take better aim—fire!"

The other rifles were seized and fired.

A brave fell on the left.

"Now load!"

"Boy pard, open on the right!"

Ned Osmond did open; then the scout's repeating rifle began to rattle out its terrible notes, and in the midst of firing Buffalo Bill called out:

"I have my eye on you men—fire!"

With the weapons thus flashing the storm of lead was terrible, and, casting aside his rifle, Buffalo Bill seized a revolver in each hand.

"Take your revolvers, boy pard!"

"You men, let your guns remain empty!"

"That's it, boy pard—see! They are staggering—yes, they are gone!" and the scout's wild war-cry rang out as the Indians, unable to stand the hail of lead, with half a dozen braves dead, a dozen more or less wounded, and eight or ten ponies fallen, turned and fled in dismay before that astounding fire.

Quickly the scout seized his rifle, and, loading it rapidly, called out:

"Watch those fellows, boy pard, while I give the bucks a lesson in long range."

The Indians were beginning to draw rein at the distance of an ordinary gun's range, which they well knew; but once again the sharp ping, ping of the repeating rifle was heard and a pony dropped.

On they sped, but a brave was knocked from his saddle and the dismayed and disorganized warriors did not again halt until they were sure of their safety.

"Buffalo Bill, you is ther devil hisself," growled one of the outlaws.

"Thanks! Even Satan loves compliments!"

"You two did pretty well, considering."

"Pass those guns up again."

The men did so reluctantly, and Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now we'll have dinner, boy pard, for, unless those redskins are reinforced, they will not attack again until nightfall."

Ned got out his store of provisions, and the party ate dinner, the outlaws sharing as the others did.

There was nothing for the horses to eat and no water save what the men had in their canteens, but to rest the animals they were all unsaddled.

The Indians, meanwhile, had camped over on the river, leaving a guard of half a dozen braves in front of the hill to prevent a dash out by Buffalo Bill.

But the scout did not appear to notice the Indians, and yet had his eye constantly upon them.

The outlaws had been secured again, and the scout made circuits around to see if the redskins were making an advance on foot.

But, no; they seemed to be patiently biding their time until darkness should come to their aid.

"We'll catch it to-night, Ned, if we stay here," Buffalo Bill assumed.

"And stay we'll have to, sir."

"Perhaps. I will decide later," and Buffalo Bill smiled in a peculiar way which gave the youth renewed confidence in his ability to extricate himself from this seemingly unsurmountable difficulty, and disconcerted the outlaws, one of whom muttered:

"Thet Buffalo Bill will careumvent them fool Indians and hang us yit, pard."

At last night began to draw near. The sun cast shadows far across the plain, and finally sank behind a distant range.

Then, as the twilight deepened, the redskins began to move into position to once again prepare to attack the foes whom they were now sure they had in a trap from which there was no escape.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SCOUT'S SECRET.

As night approached Ned Osmond had seen Buffalo Bill take the lariats from the different saddles and carefully tie them together until he made a line over a hundred feet in length.

One end of this he made fast to a stout cedar tree growing near the cliff which overhung the river.

It was all of a hundred feet down to the rocky trail that ran beneath the cliff, and which rose in a precipitous wall.

Ned at last began to see that the scout was making preparations to leave the hill by descending the lariat.

But how about the outlaws? he wondered.

"Can you go down this line, Ned, without being dizzy?" asked the scout.

"Oh, yes. I am a sailor, you know."

"So you are."

"But these men, sir?"

"They'll go with us, Ned, never fear."

"You'll have to desert the horses?"

"Yes, but human life is more precious than horseflesh," was the quiet response.

As soon as it grew dark the scout got up, went to the outlaws, and said sternly:

"See here, men. You know as well as I do that in the darkness those redskins can slip upon us, and we could not beat them back if we had a dozen good men to fight them."

"That's so, Bill."

"Now, I have no idea of giving you up, nor of being captured or scalped, so I intend to play a trick upon the redskins, and I tell you frankly you can spoil my little game if you wish. Therefore I am going to warn you beforehand."

"There is a cave on this hill of which I alone know the existence, and where I hid once when half a hundred redskins were looking for me."

"There is room in it for a dozen men, and we are but four. There we will hide,

leaving the Indians to believe that we have gone down the lariat line to the trail below."

"Now, follow me, and, Ned, you bring up the rear."

"I will free the feet and hands of these men so they can hold on, for a slip of the foot will end them."

The scout freed the two men, and, with revolver in hand, led the way along the cliff.

Not far away he came to where he leaned over, turned, and got down upon a rocky and narrow shelf below.

"Lord! I can never do that!" protested one of the outlaws.

"See here, this boy's life and mine shall not be forfeited on account of your nonsense, so you either come with me, or I'll leave you here on the cliff—dead! Which shall it be?"

There was no mistaking the words, and both men scrambled over the edge of the cliff upon the rocky shelf.

Ned followed with the agility of a monkey.

Along this shelf they felt their way, gradually descending until the scout said:

"Here is the cave."

He stooped and entered it.

Lighting a match, he revealed that there was an opening a couple of feet wide by three in height.

Within was a rock chamber half a dozen feet in diameter.

"Now, Ned, we'll tie these fellows again, so that they will keep."

It was soon done, the outlaws' hands and feet being firmly secured, and they were given a seat on the rocky floor.

"Watch them, Ned, while I go up and fetch down all we do not wish the redskins to get."

"If they utter a cry, why, knife them to kill!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

The scout left the little cave, but returned in about ten minutes with the provision bags, blankets, and the extra weapons.

"We dare not take too much, for we've got to fool the redskins, you know, into believing we have abandoned the hill and made off."

"I dropped the lariat over, and when they see the way they think we have escaped, they'll kick each other all over the hill for not having put a guard at the base of the cliff, while they'll scalp your outlaw pards and every one of them get a lock of their hair."

The two prisoners made no reply, and Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now, Ned, get out your knife."

"Ay, ay, sir!" cheerily.

"Is the point sharp?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long is the blade?"

"Seven inches!"

"Good! That will finish either of these men. Understand?"

"I understand, sir."

"If either even utters a whisper when the redskins come up on this hill, in goes the knife! Understand?"

"I'll do it, sir."

"Now, men, you know just what you may expect. This cave is my secret, and we are safe, if you don't betray us. Do that, and you sound your own death-knell," and the scout took his place by the man he himself was to guard, just as, with wild yells, the wily warriors came swarming over the top of the hill.

CHAPTER XX.

NIGHT-OWL'S RIDE.

The Indians had begun to creep up the slope of the hill soon after night set in.

They left their ponies behind them on the plain, and went on foot.

There were thirty picked braves in the band, and they were sure of success.

Under ordinary circumstances they would not attack at night, but this was an exception, for they knew their ground, they were aware of the force that they had to meet, and felt that they would soon have Buffalo Bill in their power.

They passed through the cedars, and then came to the barren belt encircling the hill's slope.

They crept across this noiselessly, and soon came within a hundred feet of the boulders on the summit.

They expected the noted scout would be on the watch.

They looked for the flashing of his terrible rifle, but then they would be upon him at close quarters, and he was but a man.

The others they looked upon only as being man to man.

They reached the rocks; then, with one wild chorus of yells, they made the rush.

But all was darkness, all was silence, save for their own wild yells.

They stood dismayed.

There were no flashes of the appalling rifle, there was no answering war-cry of defiance.

What could it mean? There were the six horses!

There were the two dead outlaws.

In a frenzy they threw themselves upon the dead men and tore their scalps from their heads.

Then a shout arose.

A discovery had been made.

The lariat over the cliff had been found.

In frenzied fury they gave vent to cries that were demoniacal.

But suddenly the cries ceased, and clear and startling the wild notes of a bugle were heard sounding a charge.

Then came a wild cheer, and up the hill came the pounding of iron-shod hoofs as half a hundred cavalry dashed to the rescue, while in advance rode the well known form of the doctor of Mountain City, Night-Hawk George Powell.

"Heaven grant we are in time!" came in the voice of Captain Frank Baldwin.

"Yes, for those cries were of rage, not of triumph, captain," answered Night-Hawk George, while the troopers were busy popping away at the now stampeded redskins, who had a gantlet of death to run to make their escape from the hill.

"All safe!" cried a voice, and Night-Hawk George shouted:

"Buffalo Bill's voice among a thousand!"

"Ay, it is, and thanks for the rescue.

"Come, boy pard," and Buffalo Bill's head and shoulders appeared over the edge of the cliff.

There was a cheer from the troopers, and over the edge of the cliff sprang Buffalo Bill, behind him, sullen and reluctant, came the two prisoners, while Ned Osmond brought up the rear.

The welcome was a hearty one, and Captain Baldwin said:

"You owe your rescue to Night-Hawk Powell, here, Cody, for he came after us, riding his horse to death to reach the fort, and we were in the saddle in ten minutes, and he led us a hard ride to this place.

"But we were in time, and my boys have scattered the Indians they have not killed."

"They certainly have, sir, and I am most thankful for your coming, while you, Night-Hawk, have given yourself away as the rescuer of my boy pard here this morning."

"I did expect to lie low, Bill, but after he left me I had a feeling that he might yet get into trouble, so followed, dodging some horsemen I saw coming in a hurry—two on one horse."

"They were your friends, Ned."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, how did you have time to do us the great service you have, Night-Hawk?"

"I was in sight of you when I saw you run for this hill, and I knew I could help you but little as one man with you, so I saw you beat off the first attack, and swimming my horse across the river, I flanked this place and rode for the fort."

"You are a dandy for riding, Night-Hawk, but I wish to tell you and Captain Baldwin something," and Buffalo Bill led them to one side and held an earnest conversation with them for some minutes, in which he told them that several hundred braves had gone down into the Red Canyon Neck of land and await a signal of the outlaws to strike at Mountain City, for they would not dare attack the fort.

He had seen the large trail, and where they had crossed the fort trail they had done so at the crossing of a stream, thus trying to hide their tracks, and he knew they had been in council with the Mounted Miners.

"My boy pard, here, and I saw enough this morning to show that there is trouble ahead, and we were going to the fort when the band jumped us here, Captain Baldwin."

The result of this talk was that the captain despatched a courier at once to the fort with full information, and asking the colonel to please send a force of cavalry, mounted infantry, and a couple of field guns with all haste to entrap the Indians then hiding in Red Canyon Neck.

"Now, Ned, you'll see a regular Indian battle," said Buffalo Bill, and the youth answered:

"I am more than anxious to, sir."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NIGHT MARCH.

It was decided, as the soldiers were returning from the chase, to go into camp half a mile back on the trail to the fort, to give the impression to the redskins who escaped that the force had accomplished their mission and returned.

Both Buffalo Bill and Night-Hawk said that the escaped Indians would at once make for Red Canyon Neck and report the affair to the main force.

The Indians had suffered severely from the attack of the troopers, nearly half of the band having been wiped out, and they had not had time to secure the horses and outfit on the hill, while, having come up on foot, they had been driven to fly for their lives and leave their ponies, which had been captured.

A couple of the troopers had been killed, and half a dozen were wounded, and Captain Baldwin ordered a small party of soldiers to continue right on with them to the fort, wishing to remain unhampered should he have to move quickly.

The dead Indians were at once buried, and those that were wounded were sent on to the fort.

Night-Hawk at once decided that it would be best for him to return to Mountain City and acquaint Captain Luke Leathers with the situation, so that he could give a warning and have the miners prepared for an attack, should the force of redskins in the Red Canyon Neck make their move sooner than was anticipated.

"If they have not moved by daylight, Captain Baldwin, we can march out from Mountain City toward Red Canyon Neck to join the troops, and thus catch the redskins between two fires," said Night-Hawk George.

"A good idea, Night-Hawk, and I will so acquaint the officer whom Colonel Benham sends in command, if he does not come himself, which is likely, for he is very fond of a brush in the field with redskins,"

answered Captain Baldwin, who was third in rank and acting major at Fort Vidette.

Ten minutes after Night-Hawk Powell was off on his mission, the night ride back to Mountain City, and the command took up the march on the trail toward the fort, but soon after went into camp.

Ned Osmond had been a close observer of all that had taken place, and an attentive listener.

"I am certainly in it to stay," he muttered to himself.

He was proud of his perilous adventure with Buffalo Bill, and watched all that took place, as he said, to "get the tender-foot pin feathers off of him as soon as possible."

When the command went into camp it was ten o'clock, and Buffalo Bill stated that by hard riding the courier had already reached the fort, and the command could reach the entrance to Red Canyon Neck by dawn, or soon after.

Captain Baldwin had forty men with him, and after consulting with Buffalo Bill he decided that he would move before daybreak down to the entrance to the neck, five miles distant, and take up position to check the Indians, should they decide to move out, fearing to be caught.

With this decision, all sought their blankets for several hours' sleep, the sentinels being told when to arouse the camp.

Ned was quickly asleep, but he was on his feet at the first call, and leaving a courier to notify the commander of the force when it came of what he had done, Captain Baldwin pulled out for the Red Canyon Neck.

Ned saw Buffalo Bill ride to the front as guide, but Captain Baldwin called him to accompany him, and thus in the darkness the troopers took up their march, the thud of their horses' hoofs alone breaking the silence, save now and then the sharp yelp of a prowling coyote.

The dawn had not yet appeared, when the narrow neck of land was reached, and the command halted, while Buffalo Bill said he would go on alone and see just where the Indians were encamped.

As has been said, the neck was formed by a great bend in the river, and the land was seamed with canyons of red clay, hills, and heavy timber, with meadows of rich grass.

There were thousands of acres in the neck, but on account of the rugged land, the entrance to it was not over half a mile wide, and if the force could command this they would have the Indians in a trap.

It was here that Captain Baldwin went into camp on a ridge that commanded the entrance to the neck pretty effectually.

The men were told to keep their horses saddled, build no fires, and rest as best they could, but they had not gotten much chance to sleep when Buffalo Bill suddenly rode into camp and called out:

"The Indians are moving, and in ten minutes will be here."

"You saw them, Cody?" quietly asked Captain Baldwin.

"Yes, sir; their camp is not over a mile from here, and they were saddling their ponies."

"What is their force?"

"A very large one, sir."

"We will try and check them at least."

"If we fail, I can retreat to the fort trail, for if Colonel Benham has come he is not far away."

"To your posts, men!" and Captain Baldwin spoke with the calm courage of a man who had passed through many such scenes and was not disturbed regarding the result.

The troop was well posted, and the men were dismounted, to make the fire of their carbines more effective.

They had not long to wait before Buffalo Bill, who stood near Captain Baldwin with his boy pard close to his side, said in a low tone:

"They are coming, sir!"

CHAPTER XXII.

NIGHT-HAWK GEORGE ARRIVES.

The Indians arriving from the fight at the hill and reporting to the chiefs what had happened, caused an immediate call for a midnight pow-wow.

Whatever had been the motive of the redskins sneaking with a large force into Red Canyon Neck, they decided to carry out without longer delay their purpose, and not wait to be discovered there, and have their intention thwarted.

It was a large force, larger than Buffalo Bill had supposed, and such a number hurled upon the mining camps by day, when the miners were at work, could sweep along without resistance, causing death and destruction on every side.

Where they could not approach by day from their country they had cleverly come by night, going to a retreat most safe by way of the bed of a stream, which would cover up their large trail.

But Buffalo Bill's keen eyes had noted their trail, try to hide it as they did, and discovering that they had been in council with the outlaws, he knew that mischief was brewing.

Standing in line of battle, Ned Osmond awaited the ordeal with great interest.

Every man there was ready for action, with nothing to hamper him, for the two outlaw prisoners had been sent on to the fort with the wounded.

It was half an hour yet before dawn when Buffalo Bill had said to Captain Baldwin:

"They are coming, sir."

Soon after, in the darkness, a shadowy mass of moving humanity was seen coming out of the timber and moving across the open space toward the ridge where the troopers were lying in wait.

It was a plucky thing to do, for Captain Baldwin, with his small band of soldiers, to attempt to check that large force of savages, for now it could be seen that the column was a heavy one, and the end was not yet.

As they bore toward the left, it was known that Mountain City was their destination, for a ride of a couple of hours would take them there by soon after sunrise, and then would begin the orgie of death.

But between them and the red carnival they sought to enjoy was that little band of boys in blue.

Nearer and nearer the head of the column came, and when not a hundred yards away, Captain Baldwin spoke a low word to his bugler.

Instantly, with startling distinctness, the dreaded notes of the bugle broke the stillness of the early dawn, and following it came the roar of forty carbines, while the accompanying rattle of Buffalo Bill's repeating rifle resounded like echo after echo.

The head of that red column seemed to melt away under the hurricane of lead, and warriors and ponies went down never to rise again.

"Fire steadily, men, and be ready to mount at command," was heard in the cool, even voice of Captain Frank Baldwin, and he added, encouragingly:

"The firing will hasten forward the command to our aid."

Turning to Ned Osmond, he continued:

"Now, my boy you will see what an Indian battle is."

"Keep close to Buffalo Bill's side, or mine, and fire only when you can pick your man."

"Yes, sir, I will," was the quiet reply of Ned.

The Indians had surged back under the surprise and galling fire, and those in the rear had hunted the shelter of the timber.

But after the first shock was over they began to rally, their chiefs, confident in their numbers, feeling sure, though their plans were thwarted, they could break through the line.

Their well-trained ears had told them that their foes were not very numerous, they had heard no steady infantry fire, there had been no "wheel guns" roaring at them, so the force must be the same that had fought at the hill.

Again then they moved out to make the rush, this time coming with their ponies at a run.

But Buffalo Bill had made a suggestion which Captain Baldwin quickly seized upon.

It was for the troopers to fire in squads of ten men each, the first and second squads having time to reload and fire together by the time the fourth squad had delivered their volley.

Then the troopers could all draw revolvers, except the fourth squad, which could reload the carbines and join in with the lighter arms.

With this plan well carried out, it would give the redskins staggering blows when they supposed each volley was the last and let them have the impression that the force was larger than they supposed.

Without a miss the well trained cavalrymen carried out their orders.

But the red column of rushing horsemen still pressed on.

Nearer and nearer they came, and it was only when the fourth squad again poured in their fire, aided by the repeating rifle of Buffalo Bill and the revolvers of Captain Baldwin, Ned Osmond, and the bugler, reserved for the last moment, that the red warriors again reeled, wavered, and staggered back to shelter from the galling fire.

"We cannot do that a third time, for their tactics will not be the same when they come again, sir," Ned Osmond heard Buffalo Bill say to Captain Baldwin.

"No, Cody, and we lost half a dozen men, too."

"Oh, that the force from the fort would come!"

"It will not do to sacrifice your men, sir, and there are enough Indians there to massacre all of them, once they break into the lines."

"Then you advise a retreat?"

"Under the circumstances, yes, sir. We have given them a very severe lesson, and can pursue hard when the command comes."

"Then retreat it must be! Ah, who is this?"

"Night-Hawk Powell, Captain Baldwin, and I have over a hundred mounted miners with me."

The dignified captain found it hard to restrain a cheer at this good news, but said:

"You have ridden hard, Powell, and have saved us."

"Where are your men?"

"Flanking to your rear, sir."

"We heard the fighting, and rode hard, for the yells of the Indians told us there were hundreds of them, and greatly outnumbering you."

"I have only my command, for reinforcements have not come yet."

"Then your courier failed to reach the fort, sir?"

"I told the captain I feared he had been killed, but here come the miners, so we will place them quickly, for next time counts," said Buffalo Bill.

The men were quickly placed in position, and not a moment too soon, for Ned had

been doing a little reconnoitering on his own hook, and now called out:

"Look there, Captain Baldwin!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW IT WAS WON.

What Ned Osmond had discovered was that the redskins were not coming as before in a solid column.

They had divided into a dozen different columns, and were charging from as many directions.

Not heading directly for the spot where they had been repulsed twice before, they were all centering toward a different point.

But just there the miners had been placed, and the nature of the ground was such that they would have to go slow over it.

To the surprise of the Indians, as they centered on the given point, they did not receive a fire from the soldiers now on their flank.

But they had little time to consider, for in their faces streamed out flames of fire, and a hundred rifles sent their leaden rain upon them.

Naturally they recoiled, and as they did so the carbines on their flank tore into their midst.

The neck, as has been said, had cliff banks all around, so escape in that direction was impossible.

To return to shelter and make a fourth charge would be madness.

The soldiers had been reinforced, they knew, and others might be coming.

They must break through, and then.

As they huddled together, a loud cheer rang out on their flank, a bugle sounded the charge, and Captain Baldwin and his men rode down upon them, Buffalo Bill and his boy pard well in the lead.

This was the deciding blow, and the Indian braves, no longer thinking of bearing off their dead and wounded comrades, made a wild dash for the rear.

Again the rifles of the miners spoke, wild yells, war-cries and cheers, thundering hoofs and a constant roar of rifles and revolvers lit up the early dawn with ghastly glare and made the scene appear like a battle in Hades.

Driven to frenzy, the warriors gained the ridge and force of numbers carried them through and over the miners' line.

Then, realizing their own large force, in spite of losses most heavy, and that they outnumbered their pale-face foes five to one, their chiefs shouted to rally and avenge their slain.

An instant of suspense there came to the whites, and then Captain Baldwin's bugler was heard sounding a rally around him for miners and soldiers alike, for in that was their only safety.

But the redskins were in ugly mood, revenge was sweet and a butchery would wipe out their woes, so they, too, rallied quickly.

Another moment and the battle to the death would have begun, when lo! sweeter than a siren's song there was heard in the gray dawn the notes of a second bugle, followed by boom, boom, boom! as three field guns were fired, and the quick crash! crash! crash! as the shells burst into the very midst of the redskins.

There were wild yells then from the miners, cheers from a hundred troopers, volleys from the infantry, the thundering of hoofs, and, saber in hand, the cavalry just arrived were charging upon the now flying Indians.

The battle was won, the redskins were flying for life and the sun rose on a gory field, where Night-Hawk George Powell, no longer a fighter now, but a humane

surgeon, was going among the redskin and pale-face wounded alike to lend his aid.

The story was soon told, how the courier had been found dead on the trail, an arrow in his heart, and those with the wounded had at once hastened on to the fort to bear his despatches.

They had arrived much later than he would have done, but for that reason Colonel Benham had driven his men the harder, and with three guns, two troops of cavalry and three companies of infantry, mounted, he had arrived upon the scene with panting horses and tired men, but ready and in time to save the day and give the Indians a lesson long to remember.

"Find out, Night-Hawk, just what excuses some miners gave for not coming with you and you will doubtless spot the men who are the friends or allies of the outlaws.

"My boy pard and myself are going to solve that mystery about the two women who held Joe up, and we'll know something about it when you see us next.

"Tell Joe, if he goes out on the next run, he may see us on the trail, and not to be surprised at anything that turns up, for we are in the game to win."

So said Buffalo Bill to Night-Hawk George when, after his return with Ned from pursuing the Indians, they met at noon in the camp of the soldiers.

"Well, my young friend, what do you think of life in the Wild West now?" asked Colonel Benham of Ned Osmond.

"I think it was really wild life and war to the knife, sir, that I have seen in the past twenty-four hours," responded Ned.

"Is such life going to drive you East again?"

"I will remain West, sir, until I accomplish the mission that brought me here," was the quiet reply.

"Well said; but let me tell you that all agree that you have earned the name my little daughter gave you of Little Buffalo Bill, and your gallant services, reported by Chief of Scouts Cody, Captain Baldwin, and witnessed by others, will gain for you special mention in my reports to headquarters."

"I thank you, sir, and you are most kind; but I am not a soldier, sir."

"True, but I hope you may be some day, for you would be an ornament to the noble profession.

"Buffalo Bill tells me he is going on a scout, and that you are to accompany him."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, success to you, and take good care of yourself—and of my Chief of Scouts.

"I will tell my little daughter you are a credit to the name she gave you."

Ned thanked the colonel, and soon after rode out of camp with Buffalo Bill, a well-laden pack horse following them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TRAILING THE MYSTERIOUS FOUR.

The battle had been a severe one, the Indian losses having been very heavy.

The miners, under their gallant leaders, Night-Hawk Powell and Captain Luke Leathers, had fought well and their losses had been considerable, but all realized how terrible would have been the blow had that large force of Indians swept down upon Mountain City, and their brave doctor and Buffalo Bill were given full credit for their most valuable services.

The soldiers encamped upon the scene until the next day, and then took up their march for the fort with their dead and wounded.

Captain Baldwin, with a troop of cav-

alry, a company of mounted infantry and a field gun, had followed on the trail of the Indians, intending to make an extended scout and then return to the fort.

The miners, with their dead and wounded, had gone back to Mountain City, and twenty-four hours after the fierce battle the reddened field was left deserted, save for the graves of the Indians and the bodies of the fallen horses and ponies which had brought swarms of coyotes and flocks of vultures to the scene.

In the meanwhile Buffalo Bill had gone on his way with his boy pard and their pack horse.

He had decided that it was best to go at once to the scene of the hold-up of the coach and begin right there to track the mysterious four who had so cleverly gotten away with the treasure in the strong box.

It was near sunset when the two reached the Overland trail, and, turning into it, Ned soon after said:

"There is where we were halted, but look at the wolves and buzzards, sir."

"Yes, the outlaws left in such haste they forgot to bury their dead," and the scout's voice was raised to frighten off the vultures and coyotes.

"See, Ned, there are the two outlaws, one brought down by your shot, the other by your dog."

"I wish Chum was with us now," said Ned, and he gazed sadly down upon the torn remains of the two outlaws, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"We must show more humanity than did their comrades, and bury them—ah! there are their horses down the valley still staked out where they left them.

"The two men who fled must indeed have been in a fright to have left the horses of their dead pards; but they are your property, Ned."

The horses were well nigh famished for water, and had eaten the grass to the dirt all around where their stake ropes gave them play.

The torn bodies of the men were placed upon blankets taken from behind the outlaws' saddles, and borne to a spot near by, where, after the scout and Ned had selected a camp for the night, they were decently buried.

After their humane work, and the horses had been well cared for, they had supper and turned in early for a night's rest, for they felt the tax upon them, though Buffalo Bill said:

"You've got iron sinews, boy pard, and are as tough as hickory to stand what you do."

"Oh, yes; I'm tough in more ways than one, I suppose, but I wish Chum was along," Ned replied.

"So do I; but now to bed, and as Joe Jarvis comes along to-morrow he can take these two horses to the next relay and leave them until his return, and then carry them into Mountain City for you."

"I guess I'll be hanged for a horse thief yet, for I'm getting plenty of stock that somebody will call me down for some day," and Ned laughed.

The night passed without any disturbance, and having had breakfast and watered their horses, which had had a good feed of grass, they mounted and rode on to the spot where the coach had halted to dress the wounds of Joe Jarvis and Ned, and the former had been held up by the feminine passengers.

"Here is where I found Chum wounded, but waiting as though he was guarding us from being followed," said Ned.

Soon after he added:

"There is the spot, for you see the coach turned off here.

"The two men had gone on ahead, as

though scared, and when I left to look for Chum the women got in their fine work on poor Joe."

Buffalo Bill looked over the ground most thoroughly.

He found the tracks of the women in some soft ground, and he took out of his pocket some paper and a pencil and drew the outlines completely, also taking exact measurements.

When they followed the tracks on to the trail Ned watched the scout closely.

He had no need to tell him more, for he followed the trail as unerringly as a hound would a fresh scent.

Here and there the tracks of the men were found.

One was large, the other small, and a diagram of the shoes was drawn as of the women's.

Buffalo Bill walked on ahead. Ned followed, leading the horses.

At last the scout halted.

"Here is where the men were met by some one with horses, and they waited for the coach, but found the women had played the game and won."

"Yes, sir; there is where Joe said the party mounted, the women, at least, but he was not so sure about the men."

"All did, for here are the tracks of both the men and the women.

"There were seven horses, for here are their tracks, so it will be an easy trail to follow.

"Whether there were more than one man with the horses of course I cannot now tell, but I would think there were two.

"The horses were here some hours waiting for the coach to come along.

"Now, we'll wait for Joe, and then off on that trail we go, and it looks easy to me, boy pard."

"It don't to me, but I hope to learn some day.

"At sea I would say it was a hard beat to windward in the dark."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE UNERRING TRAILER.

They had not long to wait for the coach, for it soon came along and Joe Jarvis was on the box.

He saw Buffalo Bill and Ned, and, drawing up, called out:

"How are you, fellers?"

"I drives a empty huss' ter-day."

"All right, Joe; how are you?"

"Fu'st class—ah! yer knows him, does yer?—why, he was oneasy away back, for I guesses he scented yer, boy pard, and he were that nervous back at ther Good Cheer, Cap'n Luke told me I'd better bring him along, for he ties ter me now you was away," and Joe spoke of Chum, the dog being on the top of the coach, and delighted at seeing his master again.

"Ther Doc', Night-Hawk George, dressed his wounded foot this morning afore he come away, and said it wouldn't trouble him no more, only not let him run too much."

"Yes, he seems all right now; but how is your wound, Joe?" asked Ned.

"Fu'st-class, though I hain't cuttin' up no shines on it just yet; but Buffalo Bill, yer did give ther reds Hail Columbia, and ther miners is singin' yer praise in fog-horn notes; but you and ther young un' are on ther trail of them petticoat road-agents, I take it?"

"Yes, and we wish you to lead these two horses on to the next relay and pick them up on your return."

"I'll do it, Bill."

"And if you hear any news of the four at the end of your run, just keep it for us, for we will doubtless meet you on your return."

"Good! Is thar' anything I kin do for yer?"

"Nothing, thank you; but I guess Ned wants to take his dog."

"Yes, sir, for if he gets too lame we can put him on the pack saddle, and he'll be most useful."

"The dog goes, Ned, and we'll let him ride now until we need him."

With the aid of a blanket and lariat Chum was securely placed upon the pack horse and rather seemed to like the ride.

The scout took the trail which he intended to follow, Joe Jarvis waved a farewell, and the two pards were off on their mission to find the mysterious four.

Buffalo Bill had no difficulty in following the trail of the seven horses, and he found that they had pushed on hard with but few rests.

After going a number of miles he discovered that the trail they were on joined one going in the other direction.

"Both trails were made by the same horses, Ned—it is the trail going to meet the party and returning with them," said the scout.

Soon after Buffalo Bill said again:

"They flanked the station which is the end of Joe's run, and went on to the next, striking the coach eastward from there, I guess."

"It will be hard riding to keep straight on, but there is a relay station on our right about three miles, so we will get fresh horses there, as the stock-tender is a friend of mine."

"We can leave our pack horse, too, and push right on in the night, and we'll fetch the next station about one o'clock."

"Then we'll know whether the four stopped there to take the next coach east, which will not be far behind us, as it takes the mail and passengers on that Joe carries."

Ned was willing for any hardship, and so the pace was quickened and the relay station reached before sunset.

The stock-tender willingly gave them fresh horses and said the coach was due in an hour going east, and it was Burt Larca who met Joe's coach.

"Say nothing of our being here, Ned," said Buffalo Bill, and, mounted on two fresh horses, they pushed on rapidly to the end of the next driver's run, thirty-five miles away.

They had had supper at the stock-tender's, and left Chum there, so there was nothing to delay them, and it was just twelve when they reached the settlement, where the scout felt sure he would get some news of those he tracked.

There was a fairly good tavern at the place, which was the starting point of two branch coach lines to other points.

The landlord of the tavern had been an old hunter and knew Buffalo Bill well, and in answer to questions from the scout, he said that he remembered four people, two men and two women, going through on the last run West.

They had not returned, as the coach was not yet in, but four others had come in on the branch line that morning, from Glitter Canyon Camp, and had engaged seats on the coach to go West the next evening.

"Describe them, Hickory," said the scout, abruptly, and he nudged Ned.

"Two men and two women, city folks they looks like, and they says they is young married folks on a tower through the mining country, where the men have some claims, they tell me."

"Where are they?"

"Gone to bed, I guesses."

Then, at Buffalo Bill's request, Landlord Hickory described them more minutely, and finding that the driver was still up, who brought them in, the scout

sought him and had a long talk with him.

What he discovered caused Ned and himself, after giving their horses two hours' rest and a good feed, to start at once back over the trail they had come.

They got their horses again at Nat's station, and had several hours for rest, after which they started once more on the trail, leaving a letter which Burt Larca was to give to Joe Jarvis.

That Joe got the letter coming events will show.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUN DOWN.

"Halt! Hands up, or die!" Joe Jarvis!"

Joe Jarvis was on the box on his run West, and he had reached the scene of his last halt by the Mounted Miners, when the stern summons caused him to quickly draw rein.

He beheld four saddled horses in the trail ahead, a fifth animal being also in sight, and this gave the impression that five outlaws were on hand, though he saw but two, both masked, and covering him with their rifles.

"I pass, gents, for I knows when I is in good health," said Joe Jarvis, in a resigned tone, and out of the coach peered the faces of several passengers, one asking sternly:

"Who is that halts this coach?"

"Go slow, pard, for there are plenty for all of you, and we are after some one we are in search of," said one of the masked outlaws.

"You will not find them here, for only myself and friend and two ladies, our wives, are along," said the man.

"Get out, and let us have a look in the coach."

The two men got out, and two young and pretty women followed, both with a profusion of blond hair.

One of the outlaws whispered to the other, and instantly the taller of the two called out, as though giving an order to some one in ambush:

"Fire if I give the signal, men!"

"This is our game!"

The four travelers started, and turned deadly pale, but they were covered by the two outlaws in sight, while Joe Jarvis chipped in with:

"I has yer under aim, too, darn yer, fer yer change o' rig, and wearin' wigs don't fool me, as I knows yer fer ther four as done me up last trip."

"And I knows ye'r leetle game, too, for yer was layin' fer a big amount o' money thet was ter go last trip westward, but was delayed, and which I has along this run."

"Gents, yer is tuk in, fer thet hain't no outlaw, but Buffalo Bill, and t'other is his boy pard, Leetle Buffalo Bill, as you knows from last run."

"Come, I has ther iron bracelets along fer yer, as I got ye'r letter from Burt Larca, Buffalo Bill, and fixed accordin'."

"You is sly and clever, but not quite smart enough this trip, when Buffalo Bill Senior and Junior is on yer trail," and Joe Jarvis laughed heartily.

The four stood with pallid faces, but to resist was madness, and, pulling off his mask, Buffalo Bill stepped forward and quickly manacled the two men, while Ned, also unmasking, disarmed them and the two women, too, the latter seeming to be wholly unnerved, now that the tables were turned against them.

"You will have to lead the two horses again, Joe, for we got them from the relay station as we came along to make a show of force with them."

"We will stick to our saddles and act as an escort, and you had better give Chum a berth on top, as he has had a long run of it, and is lame yet."

"I'll do anything for you and that boy, Buffalo Bill! But, who is they and what is they?" and Joe nodded to the four prisoners.

"Who they are remains to be seen, Joe; but what they are has been proven by their holding you up and robbing you."

"Fortunately they still had that money with them, and more, too, with jewelry enough to start a store."

"I guess we'll find them pretty slick outlaws, after all," and, mounting their horses, Buffalo Bill and Ned Osmond followed on after the coach, Joe Jarvis every now and then breaking out into a burst of laughter at the capture of the mysterious four who had so cleverly robbed him on the last run, and had planned to do so again.

"Ned, I think I know now who our prisoners are," observed Buffalo Bill, after they had ridden some miles behind the coach.

"Who, sir? I'd like to know."

"The tall man is none other than Elegant Ed, a Denver gambler, and who I have heard it hinted was the secret chief of a band of road-agents."

"The other is Bird Brandon, also a gambler in Denver, and Elegant Ed's devoted pard."

"The two women are known in Denver as Queen Kitty and Rosebud Sue. They are sisters who married those two gamblers and have become fully as bad as their husbands."

"Mind you, I never saw one of the four, but the descriptions I have had of them fit these people; and it was said that Wild Jack, whom your dog killed, was the leader of the band of Mounted Miners in the field, while the real chief lived elsewhere."

"We will know when we reach Mountain City, for Night-Hawk George knows both men and has seen their wives also, he told me."

"Then we have made a most important capture, sir?"

"Yes, indeed, Ned, and had we not secured them this run, they would have held poor Joe up again and corralled the big sum he carries, so we are in luck."

"I guess you are my mascot, boy pard," said Buffalo Bill, in a kindly tone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

The coach, at Buffalo Bill's request, was late in reaching Mountain City.

The scout wished to go in under cover of the night, and he told the four passengers frankly, if they made no display of the fact that they were prisoners, the miners would not guess it.

"The miners of Mountain City are good fellows," he added, but peculiar.

"They might wish to hang Elegant Ed and Bird Brandon, and not be over-polite to Queen Kitty and Rosebud Sue."

The shot hit dead center, and though fired at random, it told the scout he was not far wrong.

"So only 'four passengers' arrived in the coach, and a word from Joe Jarvis explained the situation and they were well cared for."

Later on Buffalo Bill and Ned arrived, and were given the boy's room, which had been reserved for him by Captain Luke.

After the latter had had a talk with Buffalo Bill, Joe Jarvis and Ned, Night-Hawk George was sent for and the situation told to him.

He went up at once and had a look at the mysterious four.

"They are the ones you think, Cody," he said.

So it was decided that an extra coach would go East by dawn, Joe driving it,

and Ned was to go through as guard, to deliver the prisoners to the authorized agent of the Overland Company they had robbed, while Buffalo Bill was to return to his duties at the fort.

Ned was more than willing to go, as he had that night received a letter from Sergeant Arthur Arden at Fort Vidette, asking him to do a certain mission for him that was most urgent, and would take him East.

The letter contained a draft for all expenses.

Ned thus went East on this mission, and in charge of his prisoners, and that he performed his duties well in both instances, the reader can well understand.

Returning to the West he once more devoted himself to the duty that had carried him, a Yankee lad, to the Wild West, and everywhere became known as Buffalo Bill's Boy Mascot.

THE END.

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